

An abstract graphic consisting of numerous overlapping sine waves in various colors (blue, green, yellow, orange, red, pink, purple, and light blue). The waves are arranged in a way that they create a sense of depth and movement, with some waves appearing to be in front of others. The overall shape is roughly bell-shaped, with a large peak in the upper center and smaller peaks on the left and right sides.

Andrea Fiamma

Per beryllum intueamur

The Metaphor of 'Beryl' in Nicholas of Cusa and the Cologne School in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries

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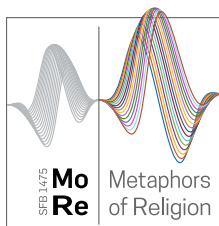
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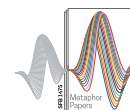


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Per beryllum intueamur

The Metaphor of ‘Beryl’ in Nicholas of Cusa and the Cologne School in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries

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ABSTRACT In *De beryllo* (1458), Nicholas of Cusa uses a specific metaphor for knowing the world, that is, vision by looking through a “beryl”—a lens that is both concave and convex. The intellect of the one looking through it can reach a vision through the coincidence of opposites. This doctrine completes the reflection developed by Nicholas of Cusa in some of his previous works, such as *De visione Dei* (1453). In that same year, Nicholas of Cusa had also purchased a copy of Albert the Great’s commentary on Ps.-Dionysius the Areopagite’s *De divinis nominibus*, a text he refers to several times in *De beryllo* with the aim of defining human *cognitio*. In this paper, Nicholas of Cusa’s use of the “beryl” metaphor is defined and subsequently compared with the analogous use of the same metaphor by Albert the Great, Meister Eckhart, Theodoric of Freiberg, and in the sermons of the Carmelite Hane, collected in the *Paradisus animae intelligentis*. Finally, some remarks concerning the relevance of this metaphor in Cusa’s philosophy are formulated.

KEYWORDS Nicholas of Cusa, beryl metaphor, coincidence of opposites, medieval epistemology, Albert the Great

Introduction

Between 1452 and 1458, Nicholas of Cusa lived as a bishop in Bressanone.¹ In those years, he did a lot of philosophical writing and preached sermons from his theological perspective (Serina 2016). However, the political administration of the bishopric was not easy because the diocese was largely resistant to his many attempts at reform. Despite this, he was held in high regard by the Benedictine monks of the area, such as Bernard of Waging, the prior of Tegernsee monastery in Bavaria, and, for a time, John Schlitpacher, who was prior of the Benedictine Abbey in Melk. In the meantime, both monks were engaged in intense reorganization of the Order of St. Benedict, which had begun at the [1]

1 Concerning Nicholas of Cusa’s biography, cf. ad es. Watanabe Morimici (2011) and Brösch, Euler, and Ranff (2014). Concerning Nicholas of Cusa’s years in Bressanone, see Baum (1983).

Council of Constance and is today remembered as the “Melk reform” (Niederborn-Bruck 1994).

Nicholas of Cusa established intellectual dialogue with the monks of Tegernsee and Melk, which was not merely limited to aspects regarding the administration of the Abbeys and pastoral care but also included debate on theological matters (Woelki 2019). This relationship was nourished by the exchange of codices and collections of manuscripts to be copied into the Benedictine *Scriptoria*. Among these was the example of Dionysius the Carthusian’s book entitled *Monopanton*, the now codex n. 58 in the “St. Nikolaus” Library in Bernkastel-Kues, which Nicholas of Cusa loaned to the monks of Melk so they could transcribe the contents.² [2]

The list of philosophical works Nicholas of Cusa produced in those years is well represented by the first and last pieces of that period, *De visione Dei* (1453) and *De beryllo* (1458). In these writings, more than anywhere else, Nicholas of Cusa’s doctrinal position in the debate on the so-called “beatific vision” emerges (Ruh 1990),³ which represents a form of intellectual knowledge of God in His essence, meaning that He is,⁴ without mediation,⁵ face to face.⁶ By the mid-fifteenth century, treatises on the beatific vision had already become a literary genre, frequently studied in monasteries and faculties of theology. The contribution that was provided by the diffusion of Albert the Great’s commentary on Ps.-Dionysius the Areopagite’s *De divinis nominibus* is well-known. His text inspired a generation of German theologians, mostly belonging to the Dominican Order. Historiography labelled this group of German Dominicans ‘Cologne School’ for their doctrinal faith towards Albert the Great’s teachings at the *Studium* he founded there (Löhr 1946, 29; De Libera 1994, 9–10; Imbach 1978, 434–35).⁷ [3]

However, differently from Albert’s ideas, according to their philosophical and theological perspective, the beatific vision could occur already in this life, without waiting for the eschatological time of the resurrection of the body, through an intellectual act that leads to intellectual knowledge of God and culminates in the union between the soul and God, such that the soul is transformed by God himself, who acts on it from within, having always dwelt in its deepest part.⁸ [4]

In a previous study, I showed that Nicholas of Cusa was well aware of the works written by these German Dominicans, including Albert the Great’s (Fiamma 2017). Interestingly, in *De beryllo*, after criticizing the Aristotelian concept of substance, Nicholas of Cusa [5]

2 Concerning Denis the Carthusian, cf. Emery (1991, 1a:187). Cf. Cod. Melk, Stiftsbibliothek 878 (722. N. 6), f. 104r. The codex copied on the model of the Cod. Bernkastel-Kues, St. Nikolaus-Hospital, 58, is in Melk, Benediktinerstift, Cod. 306 (84, B 51), ff. 139ra-246ra, completed in 1456. On this codex, cf. Fiamma (2017, 106–7; 2024, 79–86).

3 For an overview of the doctrinal features that emerged in the works on the beatific vision and also on the *quaestiones disputate* in the faculties of theology concerning the vision of God, cf. Trottmann (1995). For a definition of Nicholas of Cusa’s position in this specific topic, cf. Fiamma (2020).

4 1 Gv. 3, 2.

5 Mt. 5, 8; Mt. 18, 10; Mt. 22, 30.

6 1 Cor. 13,12; Ap. 22, 4.

7 Critical remarks on this historiographical category have been formulated for example by Largier (2000).

8 On the so-called “Rhenish mysticism” and on its influence on Nicholas of Cusa’s thought, cf. Vannier et al. (2011, 827–29).

distances himself from Albert the Great and accuses him of misunderstanding *De divinis nominibus*.⁹ According to him, Albert had not understood the doctrine of the ‘coincidence of opposites’ formulated by Dionysius about the vision of God¹⁰ since he had interpreted the Dionysian statements disjunctively, according to Aristotelian logic.¹¹ Dionysius, however, had shown that true theology is “above all affirmation and denial,”¹² which is to say, above and beyond the coincidence of opposites. Therefore, as Nicholas of Cusa adds, it finally concludes in the mystical theology,¹³ where “the apprehension of truth” happens “not as the truth itself is shadowed in image and enigma and various otherness in this sensible world, but as intellectually visible in itself.”¹⁴

Nicholas of Cusa knows that the (so-called) affirmative and negative paths follow methods that are opposite to each other and that they reach mutually contradictory conclusions. However, he believes both must be explored simultaneously to achieve a definition of God, in which the opposites coincide, as he explained in *De docta ignorantia* (1440). Albert the Great, who does not understand the doctrine of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, is not considered a good guide to reading Dionysius’ work. However, Albert is not the only one who does not understand how opposites can coincide in God. Nicholas of Cusa explains that, among his contemporaries, a significant number of Aristotelian schools (*sectae*) ignore Dionysian teaching.¹⁵ [6]

However, Nicholas of Cusa does not reject the philosophical and theological value of Albert the Great’s commentary on Dionysius’ *De divinis nominibus*. Despite having known the work for at least twenty years, he had only chosen to go back to studying it in 1453 to intervene, with greater competence, in the Austrian debate on the beatific vision. This controversy had been triggered the previous year by Vincent of Aggsbach’s *Tractatus cuiusdam Carthusiensis de mystica theologia*, which the author had sent to John [7]

9 Vansteenbergh (1915, 120), reconstructing the genesis of Nicholas of Cusa’s writing of *De beryllo*, contextualizing this text in the Austrian debate concerning the correct interpretation of the work of Dionysius Ps.-Areopagite, which took place in epistolary form. Nicholas of Cusa intervened with a letter of September, 22th, 1452, which he addressed to the Benedictine monks of Melk and of Tegernsee. In the following year, Nicholas of Cusa sent the Bavarians the *De visione Dei*, a work in which it is shown that the intellectual vision of God can only occur by overcoming the coincidence of the opposite affective and intellectual paths. Nicholas of Cusa had explained in *De visione Dei* that such a vision would only occur by entering the darkness of learned ignorance (cf. André 2006, 31–42). In that same year 1453, Nicholas of Cusa also had to announce the writing of *De beryllo*, since in a letter of January 1454, the Benedictine monks asked for the Book on the beryl to be sent. On February 12th, Nicholas of Cusa responded by apologizing for the absence and adding that due to poor eyesight he had not been able to finish the work. The monks, wary, replied that “beryllum pre omnibus habere desideramus” (2006, 123). *De beryllo* was finished by Nicholas of Cusa only in the winter months of 1458, in which, due to the clash with Duke Sigismund of Austria, he had to take refuge in the Castle of Andraz.

10 *De ber.*, n. 27, 1s. Cf. Machetta (2007, 55–81). Nicholas of Cusa’s marginal notes have been edited in Baur (1941).

11 *De ber.*, n. 32, 1–11.

12 *De docta ign.* I, c. 16, n. 43, 15–16: “super omnem positionem [...] et super ablationem omnium.” Cf. *Apol. doct. ign.*, n. 42, 4–10. Cf. Duclow (1990, 117). Concerning the possibility of the intellect to see above coincidence of opposites, Nicholas of Cusa accuses Albert the Great of have been feared to “intrare caliginem, quae consistet in admissione contradictorium.” Cf. *marg.* 269 in Baur (1941, 102).

13 *Ivi*, n. 43, 14–15: “in fine Mysticae theologiae concludit”, see also 18–19; *Apol. doct. ign.*, n. 26, 8–18.

14 *Ivi*, n. 53, 5–8: “apprehensionem veritatis, non uti ipsa veritas est obumbrata in figura et aenigmate et varia alteritate in hoc sensibili mundo sed ut in se ipsa intellectualiter visibilis.”

15 Cf. *Apol.*, n. 7, 19–21: “aristotelica secta [...], quae haeresim putat esse oppositorum coincidentiam, in cuius admissione est initium ascensus in mysticam theologiam.”

Schlitpacher of Melk. In this writing, Vincent had expressed his criticism towards John Gerson's *Tractatus de elucidatione scholastica mysticae theologiae* (1424), in which the Parisian chancellor considered, according to his interpretation, Dionysius' *De mystica theologia*.¹⁶

However, something interesting that is pertinent to my research emerges from [8] Nicholas of Cusa's *De beryllo*. In this book, he deals with topics such as the *visio beatifica*, using the metaphor of beryl in a particular way to exemplify the functioning of the human mind. Nicholas of Cusa took this metaphor from Albert the Great's *De mineralibus*. In this paper, I will analyze his use of the metaphor of beryl in Nicholas of Cusa's work with the same title to clarify the function of knowledge in the beatific vision. I will then evaluate affinities and differences in the use of the metaphor of beryl between Nicholas of Cusa and Albert the Great and other German Dominicans of the Cologne School. These include Meister Eckhart, Theodoric of Freiberg, and the Carmelite Hane, as he expounded in the collection of sermons known as *Paradisus animae intelligentis*. Given that metaphors are to be considered as historical processes, I aim to verify the hypothesis of the existence of a philosophical tradition that used the metaphor of beryl to illuminate the important role of metaphors or the metaphor of the beryl in a theory of knowledge from Albert the Great to Cusanus.

Per beryllum intueamur. Nicholas of Cusa and the Metaphor of the Beryl

In the detailed inventory of the properties and material goods bequeathed by Nicholas [9] of Cusa, a "capseta cum ocularis" is mentioned (Mantese 1962, 102n122). Nicholas, suffering from myopia,¹⁷ owned his own pair of glasses, an object that was mainly produced by Italian craftsmen in that period. The lenses were obtained by grinding an opaque, hexagonal gem at a time called "beryl" [Pfeiffer (1983)]¹⁸ To see with his own eyes, Nicholas had to rely on something produced by artisans,¹⁹ on which he had repeatedly made positive judgments.²⁰ For instance, in the dialogue *De mente*, set in Rome, the protagonist, i.e. the Idiot, is surprised by the Philosopher while he is busy working wood to make something similar to a spoon.²¹ Similarly, in his *De ludo globi*,

16 Bernkastel-Kues, Cod. Cus. 96. On Nicholas of Cusa's education, cf. Fiamma (2019). Vincent of Aggsbach wrote a *Tractatus cuiusdam Carthusiensis de mystica theologia* (cf. Vansteenbergh 1915, 197).

17 Nicholas of Cusa's letter to Kaspar Aindorffer, 12 february 1454, in Vansteenbergh (1915, 122): "propter oculorum dolorem *De beryllo* quem petitis scribere non potuit."

18 Flasch (Flasch 1998, 445) notes that the German term still used today to indicate glasses, i.e. "die Brille," comes from the term "beryllo" (see Schwaetzer and Glas 2004).

19 Cf. *Comp.*, c. 6, n. 18, 4–5: "deficientem visum beryllis iuvet et arte perspectiva errorem circa visum corrigat." According to Nicholas of Cusa, art proceeds by imitation of nature, see *De ludo globi* I, n. 8. Cf. Moritz (2009), André (2019).

20 Cuozzo (2012, 31–32) contextualizes Nicholas of Cusa's appreciation of the human craftsmanship in the broader movement of recovery of the figurative arts of the Renaissance, from Leon Battista Alberti to Leonardo da Vinci. Cuozzo has also developed this theme in his most recent publications, including Cuozzo (2021).

21 *De mente*, n. 54, 1–9. Cf. Cuozzo ([2000] 2012, 132–33).

Nicholas of Cusa describes a craftsman working on a lathe, removing superfluous matter from a block of clay to produce a “slightly concave” ball.²²

However, unlike these dialogues, in *De beryllo* the idea of the craftsman engaged in grinding the lens is not suggested (Bormann and Senger 1988). However, the reader of the text is led to imagine it when he tries to picture the shape of this specific lens, made of beryl, like a lens of his own glasses, but which Nicholas of Cusa describes as concave on one side and convex on the other. Since, in nature, beryl is not found with these specific features, a craftsman has to file the stone on both sides to produce a lens that can correctly assist vision. [10]

Being short-sighted, Nicholas of Cusa knows that his sense of sight lacks precision and that, therefore, the images of the external world he perceives in his mind are also imprecise.²³ The short-sighted person, aware of his ignorance, recognizes the need to use an instrument to see more clearly and sharply. [11]

However, Nicholas of Cusa invites us to consider myopia as a metaphor, not as a pathological condition resulting from an accidental defective sight organ. Every man who looks with his own eyes is substantially short-sighted since everyone processes the external world through their own perceptive structures, limited to the perceived here and now and through their own criteria of reason. For Nicholas of Cusa, the principles of identity and non-contradiction only favour logical, orthogonal, and quantitative perspectives, and led him to conceive of the existing as a “set of substances,” to which it is possible to add or subtract attributes, as in Aristotelian ontology. It is this ontological myopia a metaphor that characterizes the cognitive structures of the “eyes of our mind.” Nicholas of Cusa draws this formula from Albert the Great’s commentary on *De divinis nominibus*, preventing us from seeing the world clearly, and, with it, from seeing God as He is.²⁴ [12]

Nicholas of Cusa explains that the world is not organized according to the principles of identity and non-contradiction. Whoever, like Aristotle, describes the world according to these criteria, is not looking at the world itself but at an image of the world that is determined by the cognitive structures of their own eyes and reason. Thus, they believe that the world is characterized by *idem* and *aliud*, i.e., they see identity and not contradiction, straight lines and angles everywhere. Instead, Nicholas of Cusa, in his *De docta ignorantia*, explains that the world is curved, like the lines of a circumference. But this image of the world is in proportion to the world itself as a polygon is to a circumference. Therefore, people do not understand the world as long as they retain vision conditioned by their cognitive structures, no matter how much they try to adapt the image of the world, which they see with their own eyes, to external reality. However much they multiply the number of sides of the orthogonal polygon, their eyes will [13]

22 *De ludo globi*, n. 4, 1 and f.

23 Cf. *De con.* II, n. 75, 14–19.

24 For an analysis of the relationship between Nicholas of Cusa and Aristotle in his *De beryllo*, cf. Mandrella (2016, 116). The concept of contradiction in the medieval tradition and in Nicholas of Cusa is analysed for example by Imbach (2003). The metaphor of the “eyes of the mind” is found in *De docta ign.*, III 11, 246; *De non aliud*, c. 19, n. 87; *De ven. sap.*, c. 26, n. 106, 4; *De apice theor.*, n. 16, 1. Nicholas of Cusa’s source is Albert the Great’s commentary on Dionysius’ *De divinis nominibus*, cf. cod. Cus. 96, marg., fol. 231va: “mens est oculus anime; a meciendo dicitur.”

never fully be able to grasp the world as it truly is or match the actual curve of the circumference.

Learned ignorance consists of this: the more man is ‘educated’ about his ontological myopia, the more he is ‘learned’ about his distance from the truth. Therefore, he seeks help from man-made tools, such as pieces of beryl, which we imagine have been ground down by craftsman and designed to assist the mind’s eye so that it can see beyond right angles, distinctions, and opposites. [14]

In Nicholas of Cusa’s *De beryllo*, beryl is that lens that enables us to see what otherwise would not have been visible.²⁵ After being ground, this lens takes on a concave shape on one side and convex on the other. Therefore, it contains the coincidence of opposites.²⁶ Whoever was to look at the world through this material, handmade object that is beryl could abandon the logic of the finite, which he had represented by regular polygons, and rise to a *visio absoluta* or *speculatio, contemplatio, intuitio*.²⁷ This would project the viewer to the circumference itself, sight would become *subtilissima*, and the viewer would see with mind’s eyes aided by an intellectual beryl, thus allowing them to see, simply, what they could not have perceived alone.²⁸ [15]

The material object “beryl” is also used as a metaphor (Schwaetzer 2006a), which Nicholas of Cusa introduces to indicate that we need to apply “intellectualis beryllus”²⁹ to our “intellectualibus oculis.”³⁰ Only the viewer who looks at the world “per beryllum”³¹ can grasp what they see as it is without bending it to the criteria of finite cognitive structures.³² Nicholas of Cusa adds that the viewer, seeing the truth of the world, would see the unitary principle of the world itself,³³ which “omnem contrarietatem antecedit”³⁴ and which reveals the world before our eyes, like a “founding intellect.”³⁵ “Per beryllum intueamur,” grasping the world, we can then rise to simple knowledge of God. This is a foretaste (*praegustatio*) in this life of the beatific vision, which will take full place in the celestial homeland after death (*in patria*). From Nicholas of Cusa’s perspective, Ps.-Dionysius Areopagite had already suggested this path, but no one, not even Albertus the Great, had dared to follow.³⁶ [16]

25 *Ivi*, n. 2, 2–3: “per ipsum videns attingit prius invisibile.”

26 *De ber.*, n. 3, 1–2. Nicholas of Cusa describes the sphere in a similar way in his *De ludo globi*, cf. n. 4, 1s.

27 Cf. *De mente*, c. 7, n. 106; *De theologicis complementis*, c. 2. Flasch (1998, 263–65) described *speculatio* as an infinite movement of the intellect and affection towards God.

28 *De ap. theor.*, 10, 20–21 “posse videre mentis excellet posse comprehendere.”

29 *De ber.*, n. 2, 3.

30 *Ibid.*

31 Cf. *Ivi*, n. 8, 1–10, 22.

32 The metaphor of the book to indicate Wisdom is also in Nicholas of Cusa’s *De fil. Dei*, c. 2, n. 57,8; *De ber.*, n. 36,66; *De gen.*, IV 171, 1 ss.; *De fil.*, II 57, 8 s.; *De beryl.*, 66, 1 s; *Comp.*, VII 21, 3 s.

33 Cf. *De ber.*, n. 3, 5.

34 Cf. *Sermo CCLXXXVIII*, n. 5, 8–14.

35 *De ber.*, n. 4, 4: “intellectus conditor.”

36 *De ber.*, n. 12, 15: “recte igitur, ut Proculus recitat in commentariis Parmenidis, Plato omnia de ipso principio negat. Sic et Dionysius noster negativam praefert theologiam affirmativae.” Cf. Marg. a Proclii *In Parm.*, VII 1167–1169 (Cousin), Bormann (1986, 136–37), *marg.* 557: “sed adverte quod christiani dicunt deum voluntate creasse omnia, sicut enim voluit fecit, et platonici dicunt intellectum et animam cum operatione cognitivam producere.” Cf. Proclus, *In Parm.*, III 807; VI 1096 (Cousin), cf. Bormann (1986, 49), *marg.* 166; 118, *marg.* 474. Cf. Gersh (2014, 318–50).

Beryl in the Cologne School in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries

The painter Tomaso Barisini from Modena is known for having produced frescoes [17] between 1351 and 1352 in the Chapter Hall of “San Nicolò” Church in Treviso, in which he depicted “forty illustrious Dominicans.” Tomaso conveys the image of the Dominicans not, as one might expect, gathered in prayer but, instead, hunched over their *Scriptoria*, having dedicated their lives to the study of manuscripts. In this pictorial cycle, we note the reproduction of a pair of glasses, for the first time in the history of European art, which are worn by the Dominican, Hugh of Saint-Cher. Still in the fresco, next to Hugh, stands the founder of the Order, Saint Dominic, with Pope Benedict XI, Albert the Great, and Thomas Aquinas. However, in the writings of these Dominican theologians, we do not find any reference to glasses or lenses used to correct vision.

Albert the Great only mentions beryl in his *De mineralibus*, defining it in the same [18] terms that can be found verbatim in Nicholas of Cusa’s *De beryllo*: beryl is a stone of a pale, bright, and transparent colour.³⁷ Albert the Great mentions beryl along with other stones and diaphanous objects that can be illuminated by the sun’s rays, not highlighting any particular properties outside of their transparency. However, Nicholas of Cusa describes an opaque stone, which, in our opinion, he had also read about in other sources, such as Vincent of Beauvais, who cataloged beryl as a sticky and oil-like mineral³⁸—that is, as being opaque.

Other occurrences of the term “beryllus” are also found elsewhere in the works of [19] Albert the Great, such as in the commentary on the *Sentences*, in which he mentions beryl together with crystal and diamond³⁹ and explains that these stones can be illuminated by light due to their transparency.⁴⁰ Let us remember that, for Albert the Great, no object possesses within itself the cause of its luminosity, but everything is illuminated by participation in the light,⁴¹ as Aristotle had explained in *De coelo et mundo*.⁴² Brightness

37 Albertus Magnus, *De mineralibus*, II, tr. II, c. 2, (ed. Borgnet 1890, 5:32): “beryllus autem est lapis coloris pallidi, lucidi, transparentis.” The authors of the critical edition of *De beryllo* admitted of having had some doubts about the genre of stone to which Nicholas of Cusa was referring, cf. Bormann and Senger (1988, 89): “quod ad genus berylli Nicolaus considerationem intenderit, difficile est cognitum.”

38 Vincentius Bellovacensis, *Speculum naturale*, VIII ([1624] 1964–1965, I:47): “lymphaticum oleoque similem.”

39 On the difference between the beryl and other stones, see Albertus Magnus, *De mineralibus*, I, tr. 1, c. 2, (ed. Borgnet 1890), p. 2b; I, tr. 2, c. 2, p. 15b; I, tr. 1, c. 3, p. 4a; I, tr. 2, c. 2, p. 15b; II, tr. 1, c. 2, p. 26a.

40 Albertus Magnus, *Commentarii in quartum librum Sententiarum*, dist. 44 C, art. 30 (Borgnet 1894, 30:582n3): “ex partibus diaphani congregantis secundum bonam commixtionem causatur aliquid lucens”; n. 5: “commiscetur corpori diaphano.”

41 Ivi, n. 4: “nos videmus in natura inferiori, quod quanto major est distantia corporum a centro, tanto plus habent diaphaneitatis et luminis: constat autem, quod corpus humanum numquam absolvitur ab eis quae sunt circa centrum: ergo nullam umquam in se habebit causam luminis”. Cf. Albertus Magnus, *De IV coaequaevis*, tr. 4, q. 61, art. 3, (ed. Borgnet 1895, 34:654b): “lumen non quaerit dispositionem in illuminato nisi diaphaneitatem.”

42 Albertus Magnus, *Commentarii in quartum librum Sententiarum*, dist. 44 C, art. 30, Borgnet 1894, p. 582, n. 5: “in libro qui de sententiis Graecorum in coelo et mundo, sedecim capitulis distinguitur, videtur dici, quod sol majoris sui luminis quam aliae stellae habeat quatuor causas, scilicet puritatem partium, magnitudinem corporis, constantiam sive compressionem partium in continuitate, et nobilitate: constat autem, quod quatuor has causas numquam habebit homo: ergo numquam habebit causam lucendi septemplexiter super solem.”

is not a property of the object, not even in the case of celestial bodies, such as stars, which, to our sensitive eyes, all seem to shine with their own light.⁴³ In fact, for Albert the Great, the sun shares its light with each of them. The light is received in the depths by each and then re-emerges onto the surface when the stars are no longer being illuminated by the sun. This gives rise to the erroneous opinion that stars emit light.⁴⁴

Albert the Great's studies on the relationship between light and bodies represented a notable source for his pupils amongst German Dominicans in the fourteenth century. In their works, we can see the attempt to draw on Albert's works, reworking the terminology and metaphors in order to apply them in the field of the theory of knowledge, sometimes even forcing modifications to the master's original approach. This is a case of 'further metaphorization' of a given metaphor, an important aspect in the history of metaphors. As far as beryl is concerned, it is relevant that some of the German Dominicans of the Cologne School, such as Meister Eckhart, supported the idea that the more diaphanous the soul is, that is to say, devoid of formal representation of the content learned from the senses, the better its reception of form by the active intellect which illuminates it. This intellect—an idea Albert the Great would not have supported—draws directly on divine Wisdom.

This Eckhartian doctrine is also expressed in the collection *Paradisus animae intelligentis*.⁴⁵ In the sermon, in vernacular German, collected therein, attributed to Hane the Carmelite,⁴⁶ there is a description of the return of the soul to God, which was inspired by Albert the Great's commentary on Ps.-Dionysius' *De divinis nominibus*.⁴⁷ However, Hane reports that this reversion (*reditus*) takes place through the illumination of the possible intellect by God himself, who, in this way, gives himself to the creature as an intellectual form. Therefore, the more the possible intellect is empty, that is, free from entities of reason and from other products of phantasy (*phantasia*), the more the soul is illuminated by God. Hane states that the soul, which is transparent and pure, resembles a piece of "beryl" through which sunlight passes.⁴⁸ In this instant, the beryl becomes the light that illuminates it and is, therefore, transformed in its essence, becoming light.⁴⁹

43 Ibid.: "lumen etiam est forma communis et coelo."

44 Ibid. "recipitur secundum profundum ipsarum, et in quibusdam diffunditur in superficie"

45 In *Paradisus animae intelligentis* has been collected 64 sermons, which have been preached between Cologne and Erfurt in the decade 1330–1340. It appears that half of these sermons were delivered by Meister Eckhart. The collection was intended for a Dominican milieu and some scholars have seen in them traces of a reaction of the Eckhartian school against the condemnation of 1327.

46 Hane der Karmelit, *Sermo de adventu* (n. 3), in *Paradisus animae intelligentis*, ed. Strauch (1998, 12–13). For a profile on the author, cf. Seppänen (1981). Some scholars maintained that Hane's real name was Johannes Vogeles, who was a member of the commission that judged Meister Eckhart's works in the trial held in Cologne.

47 Seppänen (1981, 430): "er [Hane] konzentriert sich ganz auf die mystische Verzückung und Gottesschau und auf die Stufen und Zustände, die dazu führen. Er tut dies [...] durchaus im pseudo-dionysischen und bernhardischen Sinne."

48 p. 13, l. 31: "einen cristallin oder einin berillum." For the transition of the soul (*durchschinigin*), see Ivi, p. 13, l. 21–26.

49 Nicholas of Cusa formulates an analogous doctrine of enlightenment in his *De quaerendo Deum*, c. 2, n. 32, 1, explaining that the human mind, which has a "lumen [...] rationis discretivae," n. 35, 1–2, does not shine with its own light. In fact, the "lumen intellectuale" (n. 120, 1–4) or "lumen intelligentiae" illuminates only by virtue of God's descent into the soul. Cf. *Sermo II*, n. 2, 16–25. Cf. *De quaerendo Deum*, c. 2, n. 36, 2–3; *De con.* II, c. 16–17, n. 155, 1–175,1; *De filiatione Dei*, n. 56, 3–5. "Enlightenment" is the state in which the angelic bodies are perpetually, because they are fully transparent and thus

The soul as transparent as a rare colorless beryl is the soul itself, considered in its perfection. This is the same idea that Eckhart expresses in theological terms when he refers to the soul that gathers in its depths—as did for the reception of light by celestial bodies by Albert the Great’s perspective—thus preparing itself to receive the illumination of the *Lumen gloriae* and becoming one with God.⁵⁰ For Hane, in the man who is filled with divine light, the subject of knowledge is no longer the soul, but rather it is God himself who works in the soul and transforms it from within:⁵¹ this transfiguration of the soul in God is the beatific vision or *theosis*—the problem of the possibility of a beatific vision already in this life and not merely *in patria*, arises here, but it is not possible to delve into it.⁵² [22]

Hane’s sermon is significant in trying to find a textual tradition that can explain the introduction of the beryl metaphor in Nicholas of Cusa’s work of the same name. Both Hane and Nicholas of Cusa probably acquired their information on this transparent stone by reading Albert the Great’s work, and both appreciated Albert the Great’s teachings concerning human knowledge, which they adhered to even though they were not his direct pupils. Within their texts, they both introduce the same beryl metaphor. However, it is essential to evaluate their different uses of the metaphor: Hane intends to illustrate a model of a soul so passive before God that it becomes transparent and makes room for Him, who is, properly, The Cognitive Subject. Nicholas of Cusa, instead, believes that knowledge “per beryllum” reveals an active soul, which is the true subject of knowing, to the point that it is induced to strive, through beryl, to see God more clearly (Fiamma 2022).⁵³ [23]

perpetually enlightened by God, as Dionysius the Ps.-Areopagite taught, cf. Hane der Karmelit, *Sermo de adventu*, p. 13, l. 33: “Dyonisius: di engile sint ein durchschinic spigil gotlichis lichtis.”

- 50 In Nicholas of Cusa’s work, it is possible to find traces of this doctrine. For example, in his *De dato patris luminum*, mystical knowledge is referred to as one “deificationem” (*Ivi*, n. 113, 5–6), which is achieved only if the soul welcomes the gift of divine grace (*Ivi*, n. 94, 4–6). God himself, descending into the soul of man, transfigures it and brings it to completion, illuminating it in mystical experience. Thus the “light of human reason” is participated by the “lumen gloriae” (*Ivi*, n. 94, 9–10), which brings it into act (*Ivi*, n. 94, 13–15: “omnis actuans illuminatio, quae donum est desursum, descendit a patre omnium donorum, quae dona sunt lumina seu theophaniae”). Nicholas of Cusa compares the action of the *lumen gloriae* to the illumination that comes from the sun’s rays: through them the earth pregnant with seeds makes the vegetation bloom (*Ivi*, n. 94, 21–24).
- 51 *Ivi*, n. 36, 7–9: “in lumine ipsius est omnis cognitio nostra, ut nos non simus illi, qui cognoscimus, sed potius ipse in nobis”; n. 38, 7–10: “sicut visus non discernit, sed in eo discernit spiritus discretivus, ita in nostro intellectu illuminato divino lumine principii sui pro aptitudine, ut intrare possit, non nos intelligemus aut vita intellectuali vivemus per nos, sed in nobis vivet deus vita infinita.” Flasch (1998, 185) claims that Nicholas of Cusa would have drawn the idea of *deificatio* from reading the work of Meister Eckhart. On the other hand, the same thesis according to which all knowledge is a form of *theosis* had already been supported by Averroes and Albert the Great: against it, Flasch explains, “as Zenon Kaluza has shown, Jean Gerson had polemized. Nicholas of Cusa did not accept Gerson’s criticism of Albert the Great.” See also Schwaetzer (2006b).
- 52 On the *theosis*, see Gregorius Nysseni, *Quod non sint tres dei*, PG 45, 121D–124A. Cf. Russell (2006). On the Latin tradition of this idea, cf. Albertus Magnus, *In Dionysii De divinis nominibus*, c. 12, n. 7 (ed. Borgnet 1890, 5:430): “dicendum ad primum quod sicut commentator hic dicit theos apud graecos idem significat quod apud nos deus. Habet autem theos apud graecos duas derivaciones, quia derivatur a graeco verbo theoro, idest video sive contemplor sive considero, vel a verbo theo quod est curro, quia et omnia conspicit et omnia providentia circuit”; Nicholas of Cusa highlight this text in his copy of this book, cf. Baur (1941, 111). Cf. Hudson (2007) and Kremer (2005).
- 53 I argued that Nicholas of Cusa, dealing with the physiology of the human eye, also newly interpreting the Aristotelian doctrine of diaphanousness considering the activity of the soul in the perception.

However, not all of Albert the Great's students supported a model of a passive soul before God, as Meister Eckhart and Hane did. For example, Theodoric of Freiberg in *De intellectu et intelligibili* identifies Albert the Great's active intellect with the deepest part of the soul (*abditum mentis*) and supports a model of active knowledge of God. This active intellect is also driven to actualize itself, further in the human intellect who participates in this life, giving intellectual form to the world. The very fact that Theodoric applies the category of substance to the intellect should not lead us to conceive it as being some kind of substrate. Theodoric defines it in terms of a founding principle, as a "founding intellect," which, by manifesting itself, posits the world. The active intellect becomes a substance because it is an act of knowledge performed repeatedly and, therefore, in constant progress. This intellect is not separate from the soul, nor should it be thought of as merely its cognitive function. Rather, it is that ever-present substance which is integral to the soul (principle of *intraneitas*) and grounds and illuminates knowledge. For Theodoric, intellect consists of the pure act of contemplating God by returning to oneself, and it is the active principle of life in a human soul, as the heart is for the human body.⁵⁴ [24]

Theodoric develops this same philosophical doctrine in theological language, stating that this conception of the founding intellect allows us to understand in what sense it is possible to affirm that man is a divine image. Finally, we must consider what Theodoric states about beryl: that the soul, in knowing, can use the products of human artistry as an instrument, just as happens to those who see through beryl.⁵⁵ This work by Theodoric is not identified among Nicholas of Cusa's sources in his *De beryllo*. Despite this, the correspondence between Theodoric's and Nicholas of Cusa's philosophies are numerous, both in the notion of the intellect and in the idea, which Nicholas of Cusa also expressed elsewhere, that the human being, made in the image of God, is allowed to become a *viva imago Dei* through natural knowledge even supported by the craftsmanship.⁵⁶ [25]

Conclusion

In his *De beryllo*, Nicholas of Cusa introduces an important reference to the stone of the same name, presented in the shape of a lens, which a craftsman had made in a special way to be both concave and convex, and which was to be used as early glasses. Nicholas also assigns the function of a metaphor to this "beryl," aimed at expressing the doctrine of the coincidence of opposites, which one must look into with the eyes of the mind, just like through a lens, because it allows one to see God. He believes that the coincidence of opposites was conceived for the first time by Dionysius Ps.-Areopagite and that, to fully understand it, it is methodologically necessary to distance from Aristotelian philosophy. A few years before writing *De beryllo*, Nicholas of Cusa had purchased a copy of Albert [26]

54 Theod. de Freiberg, *De vis. beatifica*, II, 9–10.

55 Theod. de Freiberg, *De int.* III, 25 (9), p. 198, 116–118: "in usu etiam et operatione aliquorum sensuum nonnumquam etiam arte utuntur, ut patet de illis, qui vident per berillum."

56 *De mente*, n. 106, 8–15. The affinities between some ideas of Theodoric of Freiberg and of Nicholas of Cusa have been also dealt in Fiamma (2021).

the Great's commentary on Dionysius' *De divinis nominibus* as a guide to reading the Dionysian work, without, however, finding what he was looking for.

Even Albert the Great erroneously uses the principles of Aristotelianism to interpret the Dionysian corpus. On the other hand, Nicholas of Cusa found reading this commentary and other writings by Albert the Great useful, from which he drew his definition of beryl, the lexicon, and the metaphors of light, which are widely used in his work. Beryl had, in fact, already been mentioned in the context of the theory of knowledge and considerations on the topic of the vision of God, not only by Albert the Great but also in the writings developed by the so-called "Cologne School." It was found that in none of them, the metaphor of beryl functions in the same way as in Nicholas of Cusa's *De beryllo*, which emerged in the context of the Austrian debate on the beatific vision. Yet, it has been possible to follow the development of a textual tradition, for which beryl was a useful metaphor for the purpose of clarifying the functioning of human knowledge as related to God, despite the fact that it is conceived by some in terms of the reception of God by a passive soul and by others in the activity of the intellect. [27]

In conclusion, we must ask ourselves what the relevance of this writing was, in which Nicholas of Cusa, criticizing Albert the Great's interpretation of the Dionysian work, thus linked himself to the issues discussed by the Austrian Benedictines of that time. Nicholas of Cusa spent his years in Bressanone in an intense dialogue with the Benedictines of the area. As a result, in 1453, he wrote *De visione Dei*. [28]

However, in 1458, when he wrote *De beryllo*, the political picture had profoundly changed. Nicholas remained politically isolated and had been besieged by the Duke Siegmund of Tyrol at the Castle of Andraz. He, thus, abandoned the hope of a political, religious, and spiritual consonance with his diocese in Bressanone and, favored by the election of his friend Enea Silvio Piccolomini as Pope Pius II, he chose to be transferred to the Roman Curia. Bernard of Waging, who in 1451 composed a *Laudatorium doctae ignorantiae*, changed his opinion on Nicholas of Cusa in that period. Already in the mid-1450s, Schlitpacher had also joined the large chorus of his opponents. It is, therefore, no coincidence that the monks of Melk and Tegernsee only received a copy of *De beryllo* in 1469, a few years after his death (d.1464). Soon after arriving in Italy, Nicholas of Cusa visited the Benedictine Abbey of Monte Oliveto and the monastery of San Benedetto in Subiaco, which had been a competitor of the aforementioned German Abbeys in the reform of the Order. There, he held his well-known *Sermo de aequalitate* (1459). However, curiously, Nicholas of Cusa's "Dionysian" philosophy received positive feedback not among the Italian monks but rather in the intellectual circles of the Roman curia by those same humanists that he had formerly criticized almost a decade earlier in the pages of his collection of dialogues entitled *Idiota* (1450). [29]

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