

An abstract graphic consisting of numerous overlapping, wavy lines in various colors (blue, green, yellow, orange, red, pink, purple, and light blue). The lines form a series of peaks and valleys, creating a complex, layered pattern that resembles a stylized landscape or a series of sound waves. The lines are thin and have a slight transparency, allowing the colors of the lines underneath to show through.

Knut Martin Stünkel

Light, Brooms, and Drops of Oil on Thick Paper
Cusanus' Everyday Metaphors: A Suggestion for their Ty-
pology

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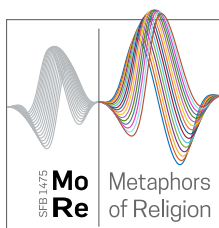
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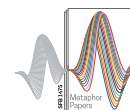


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Light, Brooms, and Drops of Oil on Thick Paper

Cusanus' Everyday Metaphors: A Suggestion for their Typology

Knut Martin Stünkel 

ABSTRACT Successful metaphors are not necessarily bound to the extraordinary. They may also emerge from the profanities of everyday life. In Cusanus' work, different sorts of metaphors fulfill a particular role in the philosophical or theological argument. Thus, the kinds of metaphors Cusanus uses have to be scrutinized, and, in particular, his remarkable employment of many and manifold metaphors of everyday life. The article aims at developing a preliminary and tentative typology of everyday metaphors in Cusanus' work that might also be valid for metaphor-usage from different times and regions.

KEYWORDS Religious Language, Everyday life, Metaphors of Everyday Life, Typology, Cusanus, Sermons

Introduction

The Collaborative Research Center (CRC) 1475 “Metaphors of Religion” is focused on the examination of the role of metaphor in religious language.¹ To its guiding research question *How does religious meaning-making occur through metaphors?*, there might be several subordinate questions, such as: What does it take to make a *successful* metaphor in religious language? What are the *criteria* that allow us to consider a metaphor successful? How does it succeed in conveying religious meaning? *How* (precisely) does it generate religious meaning? And, ultimately, does it remain a metaphor when it has successfully generated religious meaning? Regarding the phenomenon of re-literalization of metaphorical expressions in religious discourse one may also ask the provocative question: Is religious meaning the suicide of metaphor? [1]

In the following, I would like to explore possible ways of answering at least some of these questions. Remarkable or successful metaphors are not necessarily bound to the extraordinary. This holds true for both the context and the content of the metaphor in [2]

1 The following lines are developing unto the research program on Cusanus' everyday metaphors as preliminarily sketched in Stünkel (2022).

question. On the one hand, one does not only find striking metaphors in a pronounced context, such as in theology, philosophy, science or poetry. They also appear in common language. On the other hand, they may also draw their linguistic force from their origin in everyday life, i.e., in a context that somehow contrasts their new context of employment—such as theology, philosophy, science and poetry—that is considered to aim beyond the profanities of everyday life. In short: The divine might be described otherwise than as an overwhelming flash of glistening light.

Everyday metaphors, if employed in non-everyday i.e., in intellectual contexts, always contain an element of surprise and an impression of inadequateness. There is a certain kind of ‘semantic impertinence’ (Paul Ricoeur) involved here. Therefore, everyday metaphors in particular might become prime examples of bold metaphors in the sense of Harald Weinrich (*kühne Metaphern*, [Weinrich 1976, 296](#)), namely that they connect the most distant, and that is in the *religious* context, the per definition unreachable distant (the transcendent) with the pronounced closest elements of the immanent world. Admittedly, in this sense, religious metaphors cannot but be bold, but everyday metaphors used in religious language are even bolder than others—as they stress the here and now, as they always remind us about the profanities of everyday life. Their astonishing effect results from a sense of what Schopenhauer called *Fallhöhe* (height of fall) which exists between the esteemed context and the common, perhaps even vulgar, linguistic means used to describe it. It might be the case that the addressee, the viewer, hearer or reader of such metaphors becomes what French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion has coined the notion of an *interloqué*. To Marion, such an *interloqué* is someone who is dumbfounded by a new word during the process of communication ([Marion 1998, 200](#)). If these metaphors are extraordinary, they are so because they are so ordinary. Aggressive metaphors such as those used in invectives (in colloquial language) are another possible example of these metaphors. Here, one might think of the exquisite rudeness that is a particular characteristic of religious polemics in the reformatory epoch, such as, for example, Luther’s ‘farting ass of Rome’ as a metaphor for the pope or Luther himself being famously portrayed by his opponents either as the ‘devil’s bagpipe’, a ‘wallower in the mud’ (Johannes Eck) or the ‘scavenging raven’ and ‘gentle, mindless flesh of Wittenberg’ (Thomas Müntzer). Here, the deliberate violation of certain rules of decency, of course, serves a theological aim that is stressed by this particular form of linguistic means (see [Stünkel 2023](#)). [3]

However, Nicolas of Cusa (Cusanus) is not particularly suspected of using such kind of aggressive metaphors in his writings. On the contrary, his particular language is aimed at modesty and understanding. Even in cases where one might expect invectives to appear, such as in his reflections on religious opponents such as Islam, his language remains comparatively polite. Of course, this does not mean that some of his metaphors are less aggressive. Rather, on the level of self-reflection, they can be outright devastating when it comes to the description of the capacity of the human intellect (see [Ziebart 2015](#); [Stünkel 2023](#)). Human nature, he claims for instance, is like the eye of a mole [4]

(*Sermo* CVIII)²—which is, in the first place, a seemingly polite way to say that it is blind. However, ultimately, the metaphor draws a disturbing picture of human nature, for it is even more: a mole seems to have eyes of a dysfunctional nature not suited to the light of the sun that renders it helpless. Moreover, it digs only underground and, not least, produces heaps of dirt, it even might destroy fertile farmland, etc. Nevertheless, everyday metaphors play a significant role in his writings, his philosophical treatises and his sermons. Here, Cusanus exploits their full potency with regard to the form and content of his works.

The examination of metaphors used in Cusanus' work is promising; not least for the reason that he himself contemplated the role of metaphors and similes, of images and signs in the process of philosophizing—and in the processes of using/performing religious language, such as preaching. The introduction of sermon XLI *Confide filia!* is devoted to the very subject of producing a sermon via using metaphors and is, in itself performed metaphorically, using the metaphor of the baker and the process of baking bread (see Savapakarn 2025 in this volume). From these object-language considerations on metaphorization, scholarly meta-language elaborating on the phenomenon of religious meaning-making, may take its starting point. [5]

One might even come to the conclusion that it is via metaphors that Cusanus connects philosophical contemplation to religious ideas. In general, throughout his work, Cusanus shows a remarkable affinity to matters of everyday life. However, the references are not merely illustrative. According to Cusanus, the human mind has to use immanent means to explore the transcendent: “Quaerimus igitur in hoc mundo ex hiis, quae nobis hic visibilibus apparent et corruptibilia sunt, ea, ‘quae non possunt videri et aeterna sunt.’” (“So, in this world, starting from the things that appear visible to us here and are transient, we ask about ‘the things that are not seen and are eternal,’” *Sermo* LXIX, h XVII/5, 407). Not least, he took considerable pride in the fact that—via his philosophical method—he was able to demonstrate the possibility of the human mind to ascend to the highest forms of insight—and the truth of Christianity with that—in (almost) deliberate objects, the lowlier in status the better. As Cusanus explains, this is done in accordance with God's own practice who, in an act of condescendence (*kenosis*), has chosen the lowliest place, a humble maid, to manifest himself.³ Famously, in his philosophical works spoons, children's plays, glasses, words, and letters served him (among others) for this purpose. Moreover, in some of his dialogues, it is an ordinary, unlearned man (*idiotus*) i.e., someone who can be met every day and performs every day actions, who transported his philosophical and theological ideas. What is more, Cusanus explicitly states that literally everything that exists in this world is an image of the heavenly realm that is, of the realm of love or rather, of the very basis of the existence of everything that exists: “Et ita in quolibet, quod subsistit, est similitudo regni caelestis, scilicet regni amoris seu subsistentiae omnis subsistentis” (*Sermo* LXIX, h XVII/5, 409). [6]

2 “Quare humana natura de se est ut oculus, qui secundum Adam est ut oculus talpae [...]” (1932–2002, h XVII/6, 560).

3 “Unde nota hic, quo modo elegit Deus humilia: humilem locum, humilem ancillam etc, quia humilitas habet Deo gratissima ornamenta etc” (*Sermo* XLIX, h XVII/3, 223).

This is all well-known and there is no need to stress the fact that metaphors are important in Cusanus' oeuvre, and even for his particular method of thinking. However, different sorts of metaphors employed fulfill a particular role in the philosophical or theological argument. Thus, the kinds of metaphors Cusanus uses have to be scrutinized, and, in particular, the many and manifold metaphors of everyday life. [7]

Everyday Life (*Alltäglichkeit*)

Let me start with a preliminary definition of everyday life—taken, of course, from the main source of twenty-first century's everyday knowledge. According to the article in the English *Wikipedia*, “Everyday life, daily life or routine life comprises the ways in which people *typically* act, think, and feel on a daily basis. Everyday life may be described as mundane, *routine*, natural, *habitual*, or *normal*.”⁴ Everyday life is, thus, characterized by a combination of concreteness and typicality, that is, it comprises forms of action that are both generally common (and thus a possible subject of abstraction as a recognizable routine or habitus) *and* an essential (although often unreflected) element of one's individuality. As such, the occasions of everyday life tend to become ‘normal,’ in a way self-evident which means that they are not really recognized in self-understanding (and that may only become thematic if they are challenged). It is simply some knowing about how to do things, leading to actions performed automatically. [8]

The corresponding definition in the article of the German *Wikipedia* provides us with some more detail on the phenomenon: “Everyday life refers to the habitual routines of civilized people in a daily and weekly cycle. Everyday life is characterized by repetitive patterns of work and commuting, consumption (shopping, eating and drinking), leisure, personal hygiene, social and cultural activities, visits to the doctor, sleep and much more. Everyday life is seen, among other things, as the opposite of a holiday or celebration or a holiday. Everyday conversation expresses the unplanned, casual contact with neighbors, colleagues and friends.”⁵ Further elements of everyday life are listed here: Everyday life produces patterns which structure the individual existence. It is fundamentally opposed to ‘holy’ days. Furthermore, its particular language seems to be unintentional as a casual communication. [9]

Everyday life, in German *Alltäglichkeit*, is a comparatively young subject of philosophical interest, although the critique of the lack of focus on matters of everyday life counts among the most ancient critiques on the enterprise of philosophical reflection. This critique finds its vivid expression in the laughter of the Thracian maid who, according to a famous anecdote, supposedly witnessed the philosopher Thales, who was [10]

4 Art. “Everyday life,” in *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Everyday/_life (accessed March 3, 2024, emphasis added).

5 Art. “Alltag,” in *Wikipedia*. <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alltag> (accessed March 3, 2025, my translation, emphasis added). “Der Alltag ist durch sich wiederholende Muster von Arbeit und Arbeitswegen, Konsum (Einkauf, Essen und Trinken), Freizeit, Körperpflege, sozialer sowie kultureller Betätigung, Arztbesuche, Schlaf u. v. m. geprägt. Der Alltag wird unter anderem als Gegensatz zum Feiertag oder Festtag bzw. zum Urlaub gesehen. Im Alltagsgespräch kommt der ungeplante, lockere Kontakt im Nachbarn-, Kollegen- und Freundeskreis zum Ausdruck.”

occupied in philosophical musings on matters of the sky above, falling into a pit or a well. An eminent theorist of metaphors and metaphoricity, Hans Blumenberg, devoted a whole treatise to this very scene: *Das Lachen der Thrakerin. Eine Urgeschichte der Theorie* (1987, *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman: A Protohistory of Theory*, 2015). Here, Blumenberg elaborated on the supposed discrepancy between the thinking of a philosopher and his *Lebenswelt*; his typical eccentricity: “In die Niederungen des Handgreiflich-Naheliegenden läßt er sich nicht herab” (Blumenberg 1987, 18: “He does not stoop to the depths of the palpably obvious.”).⁶

However, in the twentieth century, philosophers and sociologists discovered [11] *Alltäglichkeit* as a major focus of study and possible insight. Above all, examinations of *Alltäglichkeit* emerged in the context of the philosophical currents of phenomenology, social philosophy, and philosophy of language. Analysis of everyday life as an existential of human beings played a major role in fundamental ontology (Heidegger); casual communication examined in ordinary language philosophy is an important part of analytic philosophy and the ‘post-analytic’ philosophy (Stanley Cavell) as well. Marxist Henri Lefebvre devoted a thick volume to a critique of everyday life (*Critique de la vie quotidienne*). Michel de Certeau examines “The Practice of Everyday Life” as mainly unconscious and repetitive processes (*L’Invention du Quotidien*). As it seems, the Thracian maid becomes a philosopher herself.⁷

In the notion of *Lebenswelt* as to be found in the thinking of Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann, the concept of everyday life (*Alltag*) plays a salient role. Here, the *Lebenswelt* of everyday life is understood as that what is unquestioned and self-evident; the routines of (social) life that are (or at least are considered to be) indispensable. It is that, what is simply ‘given.’ At the same time, it is only in everyday *Lebenswelt* a common communicative environment (*Umwelt*) can constitute itself (Schütz and Luckmann 1975, 23). Everyday life, thus, becomes the precondition for communication—an insight that is all the more important if religion is taken as a particular form of communication. [12]

In Martin Heidegger’s considerations of the phenomenon of everyday life one finds a remarkable idea that might prove to be fruitful for our further reflections. Matters of everyday life, Heidegger argues, normally tend to remain under the surface of conscious behavior. They are simply done or used without much thinking about them—they are matters-at-hand (*zuhanden*). A worker simply uses the hammer and does not think about it. Only if they become obstreperous, matters-at-hand come to (sudden) attention. If the hammer is unsuitable, if it breaks, or if it is outright missing, it becomes a subject of reflection—as something important in everyday life’s actions. In Heidegger’s terminology: [13]

6 See also Blumenberg (1987, 148): “Diese Differenz, das Fehlen ihrer Zugänglichkeit vom Alltag her, bewirkt, daß die Philosophie immer etwas Verrücktes ist.”

7 “Die thrakische Magd ist symbolisch geworden für ein ständig wiederkehrendes Problem der Philosophie: in der Theorie nicht selbstvergessen aufzugehen, mit der Vernunft nicht Sinnlosigkeit zu produzieren. Die Magd ist nun selbst eine philosophische Figur, als Reklamation der vergessenen Weltweisheit und Moralität“ (Blumenberg 1987, 97).

The modes of conspicuousness, obtrusiveness, and obstinacy all have the function of bringing to the fore the characteristic of presence-at-hand in what is ready-to-hand. But the ready-to-hand is not thereby just observed and stared at as something present-at-hand ; the presence-at-hand which makes itself known is still bound up in the readiness-to-hand of equipment. Such equipment still does not veil itself in the guise of mere Things. It becomes 'equipment' in the sense of something which one would like to shove out of the way. But in such a Tendency to shove things aside, the ready-to-hand shows itself as still ready-to-hand in its unswerving presence-at-hand.⁸

[14]

Thus, not only the renitent object, but also its important role in everyday life becomes obvious. What is more, the everyday object if it is for example missing, or the everyday action if it cannot be performed, display a particular context of indication (*Verweisungszusammenhang*) that is disturbed and now may come to attention. Things-at-hand, everyday objects (*Zeug*) have a world. Likewise, the everyday object or the everyday action of everyday life may come to attention if it proves to be particularly suitable for its task (although this possibility does not seem to have come to Heidegger's mind). So, if everyday life becomes in either way thematic, there seems to be a particular kind of backlash that elucidates the importance of its objects, routines, etc. for human life as such as it presents the particular world in which it stands.

[15]

However, with some religious thinkers, *Alltäglichkeit* is nothing less than the opponent and adversary of life as such. For instance, protestant theologian Alfred Dedo Müller stresses: "This makes it clear that the problem of everyday life is a question of life in the true sense of the word, perhaps *the* question of life: it is the eternally silent world of objects questioning our capacity for interpretation and our power of vitalization. Everyday life is eternally unbearable for man. It is literally a question of existence for him to overcome it. Unconquered ordinariness is a process of decay" (Müller 1929, 15).⁹ Some theologians, however, are not so sure about that at all—among them, Nicholas of Cusa.

[16]

Metaphors of Everyday Life—Attempt at a Typology

The CRC 'Metaphors of Religion' intends to operationalize the basic ideas of Lakoff and Johnson in order to examine the production of religious meaning in religious language.

[17]

8 "Die Modi der Auffälligkeit, Aufdringlichkeit und Aufsässigkeit haben die Funktion am Zuhandenen den Charakter der Vorhandenheit zum Vorschein zu bringen. Dabei wird aber das Zuhandene noch nicht lediglich als Vorhandenes betrachtet und begafft, die sich kundgebende Vorhandenheit ist noch gebunden in der Zuhandenheit des Zeugs" (Heidegger 1986, 74). Translation Macquarrie and Robinson.

9 "Damit wird deutlich, daß das Alltagsproblem eine Lebensfrage im eigentlichen Sinne des Wortes, vielleicht *die* Lebensfrage ist: es ist die Frage der ewig stummen Gegenstandswelt an unser Deutungsvermögen und unsere Belebungskraft. Alltag ist dem Menschen ewig unerträglich. Es ist buchstäblich eine Existenzfrage für ihn, daß er überwunden werde. Unüberwundene Alltäglichkeit ist ein Verwesungsvorgang."

Conveniently, the metaphors of everyday language have already been a major focus in the work of George Lakoff. They constitute the “metaphors we live by.”

To Lakoff, the salience of metaphor for philosophy is not questionable. In an interview with John Brockman he states: “Each major philosopher seems to take a small number of metaphors as eternal and self-evident truths and then, with rigorous logic and total systematicity, follows out the entailments of those metaphors to their conclusions wherever they lead.”¹⁰ [18]

Does Cusanus consider his everyday metaphors to be eternal and self-evident truths? Obviously not, as these kinds of metaphors seem to be on a different level than the supposed basic conceptual metaphors of the philosophers. Of course, Cusanus has some of them as well. However, the process of ‘following the metaphors’ Lakoff describes, is clearly the case in Cusanus’ work—although they evidently are not eternal truth, but rather may lead to eternal truths via a particular process of transcending (*transcensus*) (see Stünkel 2013, 49–50). [19]

An attempt at a *typology* of Cusanus’ metaphors of everyday life, therefore seems to be a worthwhile enterprise. In the following, I would like to present a preliminary and tentative and, of course, incomplete suggestion for such a typology that might also be valid for other material from different times and regions. [20]

First of all, there is the basic difference between abstraction and concreteness that has to be taken into consideration. Cusanus uses the whole scale of possibilities between the abstract (general) and the concrete. Of course, on the one hand, the mathematician Cusanus makes much use of mathematical abstraction in his philosophical considerations. The point, the line, and diverse geometrical figures play a major role in illustrating his findings (see, for instance *Idiota de mente* IX). On the other hand, in Cusanus’ philosophical examples, an important element of concreteness (being-at-hand) is not lacking, rather, it is explicitly demonstrated. This may again be shown with reference to *Idiota de mente*. In order to explain his ideas, the layman (*idiota*) the orator and the philosopher visit, *here and now* turns to “*this* very art of spoonmaking” (“*Et nunc me ad hanc artem cocleariam converto*,” h V, 94)—in order to metaphorically illustrate his ideas (“*Applicabo igitur ex hac coclearia arte symbolica paradigmata, ut sensibilia fiant quae dixero*,” h V, 95). Although this procedure may be criticized by others as being embarrassingly common,¹¹ it nevertheless generates remarkable results. The layman takes up a concrete spoon, and thus presently at hand (*handgreiflich*) demonstrates his more general findings (“*Idiota sumpto cocleari ad manum [...]*,” h V, 95)—thus grasping (“*ad manum*”) the general idea in the concrete object (“*Coclear extra mentis nostrae ideam aliud non habet exemplar*”—Except for the idea of our mind the spoon has no original image, h V, 96). This particular procedure is repeated several times (“*Et pulchro quodam cocleari ad manum recepto [...]*,” h V, 130), thus stressing the deictic element of his philosophical performance, pointing at the thing at hand. [21]

10 “Philosophy in the Flesh. A Conversation with George Lakoff” (1999), https://www.edge.org/conversation/george_lakoff-philosophy-in-the-flesh (last accessed March 3, 2025).

11 As the orator puts it: “*Erubeo, idiota, inquit, te per hunc maximum philosophum his rusticis operibus implicatum reperiri; non putabit a te se theorias aliquas auditurum*” (h V, 88).

There is also a considerable degree of concreteness to be found in Cusanus' sermons—which are, of course, not necessarily addressed to the same audience as the philosophical tracts. Here, Cusanus masterfully exploits the possible degrees of concreteness as well. Perhaps, the genre of a sermon requires another form of language and other linguistic means than a philosophical treatise or a philosophical dialogue. It is, however, interesting to notice that Cusanus here, in the course of more than 30 years of his practice as a preacher, is well able to use many forms of metaphor, that is, not only material from different source domains but also from diverse levels of abstraction. [22]

General/ Abstract Everyday Metaphors

There are also some more abstract elements that are, nevertheless, present in the concreteness of everyday life. Many metaphors in religious language stem from this particular area. And of course, these usual suspects of metaphors employed in religious language are not missing in Cusanus as well. For example, the metaphor of 'light' is found in abundance in the sermons. Although, however, it might also appear in a specified form, such as the "light which elucidates the village (or the small town) on a mountain," from *Sermo CXXX*: "Hoc lumen vitae intellectualis naturae, quod est superintellectuale et divinum, intravit in castellum humanae naturae, et vocatur Jesus." Celestial bodies, such as the sun and the stars,¹² the body and particular parts of it, weapons and armory are often mentioned, also fire (see on the "metaphora 'ignis'," *Sermo XX* h XVI, 307–308) and water (see, for example the jet of water of grace in *Sermo VIII* h XVI, 164: "aqueaductus gratiarum"). One also finds the description of sin as a sickness, such as in sermon LIV.¹³ Not surprisingly for an intellectual, the book is used as a metaphor as well (see, for example, *Sermo CLIV*). The metaphor of the 'way' is another example that is likely to appear in religious contexts not restricted to Christianity (*Sermo LV*,¹⁴ see on the way as an elementary symbol [Krech 1999](#)).¹⁵ Likewise, the (dead or hidden) metaphors of father and son, bread and wine, bride and bridegroom, etc. are not missing, as can be expected from someone who, after all, considered himself a Christian and, more than that, is a high-ranking representative of the Catholic Church. These all are, in fact, metaphors that derive from everyday life, as metaphors, however, they are not particularly specific. [23]

12 In *Sermo IX*, for instance, John is the morning star, Mary aurora, Christ the sun ("Johannes est lucifer, Maria aurora, Christus sol," h XVI, 180). In *Sermo X*, justice is the polar star: "Est iustitia sicut arcticus polus, circa quem aliae stellae omnes volvuntur" (h XVI, 208).

13 "Veniale peccatum facit animam ad tempus inhabilem, quousque purgetur; unde est ut scabies, cuius sunt diversae species: quaedam cito purgabiles, quaedam morphaticae et quaedam quasi leprae similitudinem habentes difficulter curabiles" (h XVII/3, 265).

14 "Est via sive modus aut ordo ita, ut per ipsum viatores ad patriam necessario incedant, quoniam per hanc viam sive ostium introitus ad regnum existit. Humanitas est quoddam bene aedificatum castellum contra adversarias virtutes bene munitum. In speciem igitur humanitatis intravit Jesus seu ratio divina, ut esset homini via reditionis ad patriam. Et dum sic ratio in hominem intravit, recepta est via seu ordo ab anima, quae rationalis est aut ut Martha sollicita circa agenda opera rationis aut ut Maria circa speculanda" (h XVII/3, 270).

15 However, the metaphor of the way might also appear in a very specified form, such as (in *Idiota de mente*) the concrete way the orator and the philosopher take through the crowded streets of Rome in the year 1450 to visit the layman in his humble dwelling.

Unspecified Concrete Everyday Metaphors

There are more specific elements of everyday life that deserve some closer attention. [24]
These are unspecified concrete everyday objects used as metaphors. Cusanus, as Walter Euler put it, connects his considerations to the *Lebenswelt*, the sphere of the concrete experience of his audiences, although he does not make any compromise regarding the substance of his theological ideas (Euler 2007, XXIV) which makes his sermons at the same time down to earth and thoroughly demanding. Thus, the metaphors of everyday life he uses fulfill an intricate task: they are part of the Cusan method of *manuductio* i.e., they have to provide familiarity with the line of thought that is very often far from being familiar and well-known (see, for example with regard to the metaphor of the mirror, Bakos 2005).

Cusanus often uses a “colorful multitude of single objects” (Bohnenstädt 1952, 49) as [25]
references in his sermons metaphorically, among them natural objects, such as stones, metals, or plants,¹⁶ although they might only be known to a minority of people (i.e., it may belong to their everyday life, but clearly not for the majority), such as the magnet (see *Sermo* CLVIII or CCXII). The more common flintstone becomes a metaphor for the hidden emblazing spiritual potential of the human being (*Sermo* III: “Nonne ex percussione pyritidis lapidis subito ignis emanat?”, see also LXXVI,¹⁷ CIV¹⁸). An example of a (more popular) everyday object used as a metaphor is the (easter-)candle (as a metaphor for Christ). Its production process and its components (collection of wax by bees, the role of the wick and the fire that ignites the candle) with rigorous logic and total systematicity are followed out to their conclusion in *Sermo* CXLIII. The sermon XXXVII provides us with an allegory about the human mind as a house to be prepared for a visitor i.e., for the visit of the Holy Spirit—including the tasks of finding a suitable sleeping place for him and choosing some tasteful pictures to decorate the walls.¹⁹ What is more, according to Cusanus, in order to purify oneself, one has to use common household appliances: the broom (besom), the file, and the furnace—to be more precise: the broom of confession, the file of improvement and the furnace of grief (“Tria mundificativa sunt: scopa confessionis, lima correctionis, fornax afflictionis,” *Sermo* X, h XVI/4, 210).

16 Also weather phenomena play a metaphorical role, such as (spiritual) dew in *Sermo* IX: “Et mediante eo, qui regit firmamentum, et mediante influenza firmamenti spirituali rore terram irrigantis” [...] (h XVI, 178).

17 “Der sollichehoche dinng wil eruaren vnd wissen, vnd der das am aller minsten nicht wissen kan noch mag, der nem ein peyspild pey einem fewr stain: der ist an im selbs kaltter natur vnd ist grob vnd vinsten zu sehen, noch hat er in im verpargen klares liecht vnd solliche hicz, das man da mit ein gancze stat verprenen möcht” (h XVII/6, 469/470).

18 “Et habet lumen rationis, in quo relucet lumen aeternae rationis; et potest intellectus concitatus quasi ignis ex silice elicitus per lumen, quod eo resplendet, crescere sine termino, sicut videmus intellectum semper posse proficere et numquam satiari; et proficit in schola Christi, quia ipse est magister” (h XVII/6, 546).

19 “Domus sollicite praeparetur! Purgetur per immunditiae peccatorum purgationem, quia non est spiritus sicut porcus etc. [...] Post purgationem oportet ornare variis picturis sanctarum meditationum. [...] Item oportet ei lectum parare, quia non est similis molendinario, qui in tumultu dormit etc” (h XVII/1, 85).

Cusanus also talks about the “coin of the Word of God,” introducing into this metaphor his (everyday) knowledge about coinage and the mixing of metals (see *Sermo* CLXXII).²⁰

At least some of the everyday metaphors Cusanus employs are likely to cause some frowning of eyebrows. Cusanus also uses bodily functions, such as metabolism which sometimes, in consequence, might lead him to the verge of becoming indecent (see *Sermo* CLXXVIII).²¹ On the other hand, the metaphor of marriage may lead to spiritual insight (see *Sermo* XLI).²² According to Cusanus, the Holy Spirit is an “indissolubly binding glue” that connects the Father and the Son and also us to God:

For just as the Holy Spirit is an indissolubly binding glue through which the Father and the Son love each other and us, so the power of love is in a sense a bond through which we are able to unite with God in love and are glued together in God, who is our neighbor. (Sicut enim Spiritus Sanctus est nexus et gluten indissolubile, quo Pater et Filius se et nos diligunt, sic virtus caritatis nexus quidam est, quo formaliter nos Deo amorose nectitur atque proximo in Deo conglutinamur.) (LIX, h XVII/4, 319)

And even alcohol’s metaphorical potential is not rejected but duly exploited: spirits (that is, hard liquor) might become a metaphor for the divine Spirit that is the vitalizing presence in all minds (XCVIII).²³

However, it is not only objects that come to metaphorical use in Cusanus’ thinking. Processes and actions might be religious metaphors as well (see, for example, [Dushin 2008](#) on the metaphor of running).²⁴ Everyday actions are not the least among them. In the sermons, one finds Cusanus’ contemplation on the actions of ‘searching and finding’ that may be used to describe the process of conversion (*Sermo* LXXVIII).²⁵ In Cusanus’ work, one also hits upon some considerations on one of the ‘deadest,’ or rather, most forgotten metaphors (Jürgen Ebach) in the field of religion: the fact that the divine is ‘speaking’ (compare *Sermo* XCVI). The action of sifting, *cribratio*, as used by Cusanus to characterize his particular hermeneutical way of dealing with a supposedly problematic

20 Compare LI on the metaphor of the changer of coins (“nummularium”) who spoils the only royal coin (“moneta regalis”) (h XVII/3, 236).

21 “Deus est cibus spiritus nostri. Nam spiritus noster cibus vitae suae mediante calore amoris digerit fide, sublimat spe, et unit dilectione. Deus igitur seu sapientia sive verbum est cibus intellectus nostri, et intellectus noster est cibus verbi” (h XVIII/4, 287).

22 “Coniugium nobis aperiat similitudine sua intellectum: Tu, qui liber es, potes cum quacumque libera contrahere. [...] Ita est de anima, quae in hoc mundo quaerit, quem amet et cui se desponsat, scilicet vel huic vitae lubricae vel vitae stabili. Et efficitur unum [I Cor. 6,16.] cum ea, quam eligit. [...] et in magno sacramento [Eph. 5,32.] matrimonii hoc figuratum ostendit, quo modo illa anima, quae vitae seu Christo adhaeret per desponsationem, illa est ut ‘os ex osse Christi et caro de carne [Eph. 5,30.] Christi’ (h XVII/ 2, 161/162). On another proponent of the metaphor of marriage, Johann Georg Hamann, in the context of adequate philosophizing see Stünkel (2018, 45–50).

23 “Nam est in omnibus ille spiritus, unde fit de omnibus fructibus vinum et extrahitur aqua ardens de pomis, de cervisia etc., quia ibi est spiritus ille. Et sicut in omnibus talibus est vis divini Spiritus omnia vivificantis, qui vocatur vivificans [I Cor. 15,45.], ita in omnibus rationabilibus spiritibus est vis Verbi Dei seu rationis infinitae” (h XVII/6, 527).

24 Compare Stünkel (2022, 82–83) on the movement of metaphors.

25 “Item nota, quo modo invenire est gaudiosum, quia est finis motus quaerentis. Et gaudium huius mundi quaerentis et invenientis et congaudentium est similitudo, quo modo conversio peccatoris est gaudiosa” (h XVII/6, 478).

text in his *Cribratio Alkorani*, the sifting of the Qur'an, is a vivid and concrete metaphor that is carefully chosen regarding everyday human practice.

Specific Concrete Everyday Metaphors

The highest degree of concreteness, the specificity of the metaphor might be exemplified [30] by Cusanus' *Sermo* CXXXV, in which "the sound of the trumpet (tuba) in an army" ("de voce tubae in exercitu"), is a metaphor for the word of God. The trumpet is heard by everyone alike, but it causes everyone to do his individual duty, for example, caring for the horses, loading the vehicles, gathering the weapons, etc.²⁶ So, the metaphor itself hints at a certain kind of particularity and specificity. There is a considerable difference in precision between this kind of metaphor and the more general 'God's Word is sound' or 'God's word is an awakening sound.'²⁷ Likewise, in the same sermon CXXXV, divine justice is not just 'bread,' but rather "moist bread." This, of course, refers to common everyday knowledge. Everybody knows that, without a certain degree of moisture, (stale and hard) bread would not be edible and nourishing. Rather, it is likely to cause choking and suffocation—and gives rise to the danger that the bread is spat out. Accordingly, Cusanus argues, the bread of justice is moistened with the liquid of compassion.²⁸ Also, precise *specific actions* are used: Baptism, for example, according to sermon CXIX, is the process of "washing a filthy picture off from a wall in order to prepare space for a new one" ("quasi si aliqua foeda imago in pariete ablueretur", *Sermo* CXIX). And one last example of this kind of precision and concreteness: Understanding, that is guided by belief (religious insight) is, according to Cusanus, "a drop of oil on thick paper"—as it makes the obscure (untransparent) transparent (*Sermo* CLIII)²⁹—the same process of clarification is described in *Sermo* CLXXVII³⁰.

Many of these concrete metaphors from everyday life assign human professions [31] and the corresponding objects and specific actions connected to them. As such, these particular kinds of metaphors combine concrete specified objects, specified actions and specialized persons as sources to draw upon. They form an all-encompassing kind of specified metaphor constituting a particular horizon of indication that, as a whole, might become allegorical. Some of them are not introduced by Cusanus himself, but

26 "Sicut exemplum de voce tubae in exercitu, quae una vox tubae auditur per omnes, sed unus ad hanc vocem tubae surgit ad parandum equos, alius ad colligendum sarcinulas, alius ad onerandum currus, alius ad induendum arma etc. Sic Sapientia uno verbo vocat omnes animas ad se, ut divitiis eius adimpleantur, sed quaeque venit in ordine suo [I Cor 15,23.] (h XVIII/1, 72).

27 Compare *Sermo* LIX on the biblical metaphor from John 10,1: Christ is not only the door, but rather the 'door of the sheepfold': "Evangelium nos instruit Christum esse ovilis ostium, per quod omnis spiritus praesidentiae pastoralis intrare debet, ut pascua inveniat [Joh. 10,9.], quae vitam praestant abundantem" (h XVII/ 4, 316).

28 "Iustitia est sicut panis, in quo est humidum, sine quo non pascit panis. Humiditas est misericordia. Rigor iustitiae non pascit, sed temperata cum misericordia. Coincidit igitur iustitia cum misericordia seu gratia" (h XVIII/1, 76).

29 "Et ardor, qui in anima oritur ex conceptu, qui ex fide est vocatur caritas operiens multitudinem peccatorum [Jac 5,20.], sicut gutta olei immissa papyro vel pergamenno denso facit, quod tollitur opacitas et oritur claritas" (h XVIII/2, 156).

30 "[...] sicut oleum fusum super papyrus subintrat et tollit eius opacitatem, faciendo ipsam transparentem, et conservat a frigore constringente" (h XVIII/4, 283).

already given to examination through Scripture. Most of these are connected to the field of agriculture and human sustainment; fishermen, vineyards, hunters (for example in *De venatione sapientiae* and *Sermo CXIX*), we also find Christ as the field (*Sermo XL*) or the pasture (*Sermo LIX*), etc.³¹ At times, Cusanus explications of his metaphors become very detailed, such as, for example, in *Sermo CCLXXX* from 1457, titled *Ego sum pastor bonus*. Here, Cusanus elaborates (of course) on the profession of the shepherd and his “art of grazing” (“ars pascendi,” see [Lentzen-Deis 1991, 213](#)), the use of his voice, his particular care and his lore of nourishing herbs—which, in sum, becomes a metaphor for the clergy and its predominant task.

More genuine Cusanic metaphors belong to a more advanced level of human civilization, at least concerning the division of labor. They are the results of specialization. As it seems, Cusanus entertains a considerable affinity for craftsmen and their specific craftsmanship.³² Here, it was Hans Blumenberg again who considered this fact to be significant, as the creative human being is related to the technician rather than to the artisan ([1996, 622](#); compare [Yamaki 2005](#)). Accordingly, as an example of human capacity and creativity, the particular craft or art of craftsmen becomes a favorite source of metaphorization: on the baker, see [Savapakarn \(2025\)](#), on the miller, see [Ranff \(2025\)](#) in the present volume. Cusanus also uses the tailor, his craft (see, for example, *Sermo LXXIV*) and the products of his craft repeatedly as a metaphor in his sermons. The same goes for the smith (*Sermo CLXXIX*) or the potter (*Sermo CXXIX*). The art of a woodturner (“ars tornatalis”) guides his considerations about the relation between potential and actual being in *De ludo globi* ([Glei 2016, 265](#)). Merchants and practices of commerce appear over and over again (*Sermo CCI*, see also the idea of healthy competition in the way to serve God in *De pace fidei*). We meet the painter as a metaphor for angels and their specific task: as the painter, who has to paint the picture of a king, first of all cleans and undercoats the wall before he starts painting (*Sermo CXXXVII*).³³ We even meet the painter of a portrait as a metaphor for God himself (*Sermo CCLI*, see [Mandrella 2005, 138](#)). The stern teacher becomes a metaphor for the Law (*CLXIX*). In sermon *CLXXVIII* the philosophically well-known cithara-player appears as a metaphor for the Creator. And in sermon *CLXIX* Cusanus claims: Let us act like goldsmiths, checking something valuable and cleaning it to perfection.³⁴

It is important to notice, however, that all these concrete examples from everyday life do not (and even do not have to) suggest much of an expert knowledge on the professions in question. On the contrary, they work even better in their metaphorical purpose if such expert knowledge is not involved. Although Cusanus uses so many human professions

31 In *Sermo XLIX*, Cusanus uses the process of irrigation in an allegorical image: Mary appears as an aqueduct, Jesus is the river, and the saints represent the fertile fields irrigated by them.

32 Compare *Sermo LXI*: “Et quia ‘fabrificando fabri sumus’, operatio est ‘fecunditas’, ars ‘proles’, delectatio ‘nexus’ (h XVII/5, 341).

33 “Paratur autem via per angelum, cuius officium est ‘purgare, illuminare et perficere’. Sicut pictor intendens pingere imaginem regis in pariete, purgat parietem, illuminat seu dealbat, deinde perficit intentum” (h XVIII/1, 82–83).

34 “Faciamus igitur sicut aurifabri, qui habent in lapide probam auri et perfecti et ad signum illius vident, quantae sit perfectionis aurum oblatum, et purgant quousque concordet et sit perfectum; tunc est verum et permanens” (h XVIII/3, 231). See also *Sermo CLXXI*.

for his metaphorological purpose, it is not clear, however, if he possessed real and concrete knowledge of these diverse crafts that is, if his knowledge went beyond that what everybody knew from everyday life. After all, *he did not have to* in order to use the craft and the profession as an *everyday metaphor*. His intended audience, albeit it is part of everyday life, does not have this expert knowledge, not all of them and not about everything. These are simply the things one knows about, at least from hearsay.

Specified Everyday Knowledge on a Specialist's Actions: The Glass-Blower as Metaphor

There is one metaphorical illustration Cusanus employs several times in his work, interestingly right from the beginning up to the end of his authorship. On several occasions, among them in *Idiota de mente*, he talks about the work of a particular craftsman: the glass-blower. Starting from a short mention in sermon III from 1431, where Cusanus stresses that the glassblower makes beautiful glass out of ashes³⁵ (a description that cries out for metaphorical interpretation), up to the *Cribratio Alkorani* from 1460/1461, the concrete craft of glassblowing is used to illustrate his ideas both in his (more) philosophical and his more religious (popular) works. Ultimately, the employment of the metaphor serves the same aim: the description of the divine and its actions. Apart from that, however, there are differences regarding the aspects of God's works Cusanus wants to explain. [34]

The instrumental metaphor of the glass-blower also allows Cusanus to characterize the process of inspiration. This is the main idea of employing the metaphor in his *Dialogus de Genesi* (see [Schneider 2021](#)). Here, Cusanus, in particular, stresses the *Alltäglichkeit* of his example. It might be supposed that one knows about the way a glass is made: "Vidisti, puto, vasa vitrificatoria arte fieri. – Vidi" (h IV, 117). After all, one has the impression that metaphorizing the Spirit's effect by the glass-blowing process seems somehow 'natural' or obvious. [35]

In *Idiota de mente*, our glass-blower practicing his craft even becomes a metaphor for omnipotence. In omnipotence, wanting (something) and executing (it) coincide—and that, according to Cusanus, resembles a glass-blower who blows his breath (which executes his will) into the glass. In this *spiritus* are the glassblower's word ("verbum"), his concept ("conceptus") and his potential ("potentia"). If the breath ("spiritus") did not contain the glassblower's craft (potential) and his concept (idea of the glass), the glass could not have been produced.³⁶ [36]

The most elaborate passage stems from the *Cribratio Alkorani*. Here, Cusanus describes his use of the craft of glass-blowing as a means by which simpler minds (*simpliciores*) might be guided to insight about the father, the son and the spirit, albeit, as he admits, it [37]

35 See also *Sermo XXXVII* and *Sermo LVIII*

36 "Nam velle cum exsequi in omnipotentia coincidunt. Quasi ut dum vitrificator vitrum facit. Nam insufflat spiritum, qui exsequitur voluntatem eius, in quo spiritu est verbum seu conceptus et potentia; nisi enim potentia et conceptus vitrificatoris forent in spiritu, quem emittit, non oriretur vitrum tale" (h V, 199–200).

might be grasped only from a far distance (“aliqua³⁷liter a remotis”). It is interesting to notice that here, Cusanus intends *the more unspecific everyday religious metaphors* of the father, the son and the spirit (as indicating the Trinity), in turn, *to be metaphorically addressed by a more specific metaphor of everyday life*. In Cusanus’ attempt to characterize the way the Trinity works, metaphor metaphorizes metaphor. Of course, crafting is an everyday practice for a craftsman and craftsmen and their work are element of the everyday lives of others as well. Cusanus’ explication of his example runs as follows: It takes intelligence to make glass. The craftsman uses suitable instruments (such as an iron glass-blowing pipe) and his breath to form the kind of glass he has conceptually in mind.³⁸ This process, Cusanus claims, has similarities with the work of nature: “ut quisque scit et videt”—as everybody knows and sees. His example, thus, relies on common knowledge and immediate sensate (self-)evidence. Craft (Art) operates from without, Nature from within. It is obvious, thus, that the metaphor of glassblowing depends on very basic spatial metaphors. The blowing of glass is internally guided by the craftsman’s intellect—based on and guided by an intellectual concept (of the glass).

Everyday Metaphors and Religious Language

Cusanus’ particular use of metaphors of everyday life serves several means. Their employment is a deliberate decision of him and follows a particular agenda. At places, he might have used the more general and unspecific metaphors, but decided otherwise. Everyday metaphors are, thus, deliberate or pronounced metaphors (and, as such, a prime subject of the CRC’s research work). [38]

The diverse types of metaphors (abstract/ general, unspecified concrete, specified concrete) of everyday life correspond to a combination of diverse requirements, such as the general philosophical idea behind them, the requirements of texts of reference (sermons, scripture), the context of the presentation, the concrete rhetorical situation, the concrete historical background. The more concrete they are the more impressive they are as well. Cusanus uses metaphors of everyday life in their concreteness, specificity, *actions* and *habitus*, and, repeatedly, in their combination as a particular human *profession*. [39]

In agreement with the theological tradition of Titus 1, 15: “Unto the pure all things are pure; but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure,” Cusanus does not think (like some of us might think) that his references to the pits of everyday life might [40]

37 “Et ut simpliciores exemplo sensibili ducantur, per quod patrem, verbum et spiritum aliqua³⁷liter a remotis videant, pro intellectu praecedentium et sequentium est considerandum, quomodo magister, qui vitra facit, operatur” (h VIII, 69).

38 “Vitrificatura enim est opus intelligentiae, carentes intellectu eam artem non capient. Applicat autem cannam ferream et ei adhaerere facit aptam materiam et insufflat in ipsam et efficit vas vitreum, prout voluerit. In eo flatu est considerandum, quomodo intra materiam operatur et format eam. Opus enim illud similitudinem habet operis naturae: ars enim ab extrinseco operatur, natura enim intrinsece, ut quisque scit et videt. In eo igitur considero duo: unum est extrinsecum eius et est sensibile et est ventus seu aer, qui exspiratur per artificem; in intrinseco illius considero intellectum quia artifex ad finem faciendi vas vitreum operatur. Intelligit enim id, quod facit. Hic intellectus non intelligeret nec se nec id, quod operatur, nisi de se generaret conceptum vasis, quod efficit; et hunc conceptum intellectuale verbum dicimus” (h VIII, 69).

spoil his more abstract speculations on matters of the divine. On the contrary, it might even be argued that Cusanus' everyday metaphors re-individualize the common routines to a special way of intellectually getting closer to God. As such, these everyday metaphors are expressions of the fact that in Cusanus' philosophy, the "increase of transcendence is constantly combined to an increase of immanence" (Blumenberg 1996, 563)—the more distant the divine is, the closer become the metaphors to describe it (negative theology requires everyday metaphoricality). As the everyday metaphors re-present the world of everyday life, the immanent sphere gains the potential of transcending while at the same time being appreciated as a possible means of affirmative theology and as the basis for human life as such. As such, everyday life is included in the process of theology (theologizing) as an important element of the process of transcending performed in religious language.

To return to Lakoff's thesis on the dependence of philosophers on their basic metaphors: The very fact that Cusanus might use anything and everything as an instrument to transcend the mind to the highest level prevents him from taking anything as an eternal and self-evident truth. To speak metaphorically, he could take each of these metaphors as a way to eternal truth.³⁹ [41]

What can be learned from the examination of metaphors of everyday life in Cusanus' work as a particular example of religious object-language? As it seems, everyday metaphors are the most obvious examples of religious language's aim of indicating the unreachable with the particular means at hand. In religious language, everyday metaphors fulfill an important task. They at the same time stun and connect the transcendent sphere not merely to the immanent, but more specifically to a sphere well known, at hand and—perhaps—self-evident. Following Schütz and Luckmann one could say that they make religion as communication possible. [42]

The 'semantic energy' metaphors of everyday life generate consists of the fact that these metaphors open up particular areas of knowledge the audience is self-evidently familiar with and, thus, binds the subcutaneous opinions, obligations and habitus to the transcendent sphere.⁴⁰ Via reference to everyday life, religion can be presented as a daily routine/duty. A habitus is considered to be a 'natural' or even essential practice that is not or no longer questioned and, as such, not very likely to change, or it changes only gradually and against some resistance. Thus, the semantic energy of the metaphors of [43]

39 Compare *Sermo CL*: "Unde sicut similitudines illae tantum habent veritatis quantum assimilantur exemplari, a quo procedunt, et participant ipsam veritatem suo modo, remanente veritate rei absoluta, sic omnis creatura est imago absolutae veritatis, quae est verbum" (h XVIII/2, 134).

40 On the particular (two-sided) energy displayed by Cusanus' use of language compare Blumenberg's considerations. He rightly points out that the metaphor in Cusanus implies movement, and that is, one could add, movement from both sides, i.e., from the intellectually pursuing human mind as well as from the permanently eluding 'object' of the pursuit, which thus exerts a pull and makes knowledge an essentially dynamic enterprise: "Der Cusaner hingegen hat die Metapher in einer ihrer ganz authentischen Assoziationsmöglichkeiten entwickelt, indem er die Spur nicht als statische Signatur des Schöpfers an seinem Werk versteht, sondern als die einen Pfad signierende Verweisung eines flüchtigen und zu verfolgenden Zieles. [...] Für den Cusaner ist die Spur Anweisung zur Bewegung, zur Verfolgung" (Blumenberg 1996, 575). For Karl Jaspers, this is the main paradox of Cusanus' particular way of philosophizing: "Die Unendlichkeit erzeugt durch ihre Anziehungskraft die Sehnsucht. Der Sehnsucht zu folgen, bringt in die Gegenwärtigkeit des Unendlichen. Sehnsucht und Ruhe koinzidieren" (Jaspers 1968, 30).

everyday life results from their very inertia: the inertia of the objects and processes they represent and the inertia of the words and expressions connected to them in language. Not only the object, but also the language of the domain in question is conservative (matters of the household, the family etc.). Metaphors of everyday life are at the same time stunning or, perhaps, revolutionizing *and* essentially conservative in nature.

Everyday metaphors used in religious language, thus, do not simply and awkwardly indicate the transcendent, but rather, they (in turn) also show the importance and dignity of everyday life: They might introduce, or better, stress the intermingling of the sacred and the profane. In Cusanus, they might do so via the model form of a human profession, which provides an all-compassing context of indication of everyday life. [44]

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