

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 of different phases and amplitudes, creating a complex, layered pattern that resembles a spectrum or a series of harmonics. The waves are centered around the middle of the page, with some peaks and troughs extending towards the top and bottom edges.

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**Exploring the Cosmos: Unraveling Cusanus'  
Metaphors  
Introduction**

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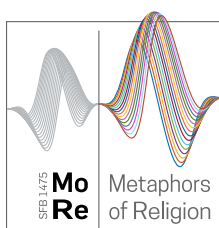
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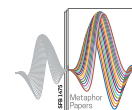
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# Exploring the Cosmos: Unraveling Cusanus' Metaphors

## Introduction

Linda Simonis 

Knut Martin Stünkel 

The works of Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) distinguish themselves by an extensive range of metaphors spanning from things and circumstances of everyday life and aspects of the natural world to cosmological phenomena and more abstract geometrical and mathematical images. Many of these metaphors challenge the reader due to their often unusual and daring combination of elements, which appear to be semantically incongruous or remote from each other. [1]

In this special issue, we want to take up this challenge and further explore both the scope and the particularities of Cusanus' figurative language. In this attempt, the presented case studies will also serve as test cases to investigate conceptual issues of metaphor analysis, such as the relations of source and target domains and the mapping process (see [Krech, Karis, and Elwert 2023](#), par. 4, 48–49). [2]

Scholarly research so far has confirmed the salient relevance of metaphors for Cusanus' thinking. In particular, his innovative philosophy of language is closely related to his use of metaphor. The role of language in his thought as a means of insight and a human existential cannot be overestimated (see [Flasch 2001](#), 122). However, while Cusanus' thoughts about language have thus been amply commented, studies examining Cusanus' *use of language* and, in consequence, the concrete processes of metaphorizations he applies, are much less common. In particular, the question of how, in Cusanus' texts, language functions as *religious* language i.e., as a means to articulate religious thoughts and attitudes, is still largely understudied. As a notable exception, however, it is useful to recall James Biechler's study on the formation of Cusanus' religious language (1975). As Biechler emphasizes, the shaping of Cusanus' religious language was, to a considerable extent, promoted by his engagement with ancient Greek and Roman texts, in particular in the context of his mission to Constantinople in 1437. [3]

Above all, Cusanus' metaphors are closely related to his concept of *transcensus*. To [4]

him, the process of thinking must not stop at merely stating and repeatedly confirming the difference between the transcendent and the immanent as in negative theology. Rather, Cusanus emphasizes in his writings the necessity of (aggressively) thinking beyond its limitations (compare Ziebart 2015) in an asymptotic approach to the divine up to the point when metaphors ‘explode’ (see Brient 2025 in the present volume) or become cataphors (see Stünkel 2023). This process is conceptualized as *transcensus*. For this purpose, the methodological instructions on the process of transcending by means of linguistic considerations towards a higher level of knowledge must be examined more closely. Metaphors seem to be a particularly suitable instrument for the linguistic formulation of the idea of *transcensus*. For, in a sense, metaphors already carry the *transcensus* in their name: as *meta-pherein*, the metaphor performs the transfer, the self-transcendence of thought (Stünkel 2022, 79).

For Cusanus, metaphors are therefore not merely a means to an end, but they reveal something decisive: the possible path to the divine. Accordingly, as Hans Gerhard Senger has explained, for Cusanus, language and metaphor (or metaphorization) belong closely together: there is an inherent disposition of language towards metaphor. Theological speech operates by means of transcending concepts that transfer linguistic meaning from a lower to a higher level of cognition and understanding (Senger 1979, 100). It is no surprise, then, that the topic of metaphors has already found a broad appeal in research on Cusanus: various of his metaphors in general and also those that refer specifically to concrete objects or particular kinds of action have already become the subject of numerous detailed studies.<sup>1</sup> In his introduction to Cusanic thought, Clyde Lee Miller, for example, has emphasized the special role of everyday experiences in the process of required conjectural thinking in his detailed study of Cusanus’ metaphors for the mind (Miller 2003). To unravel Cusanus’ metaphors, thus, seems to be a worthwhile enterprise in many regards. [5]

## Aim of the Special Issue

The present volume follows both a philological and a systematic aim. First, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of Cusanus’ thinking and the way he employs religious language. Secondly, the contributions in this special issue particularly aim at a clarification and further development of the CRC’s basic systematic assumptions, in particular the question of the way metaphors make religious sense,<sup>2</sup> the role of domains and mapping (compare Lakoff 1986, 294) in the process of metaphorization, and the explication of the important phenomenon of continued or further metaphorization (*Weitermetaphorisierung*).<sup>3</sup> [6]

1 For example, see on the metaphor of the mirror Konersmann (1991) and Grotz (2009), likewise the collected volume Bocken and Schwaetzer (2005); on the metaphor of the book Kazuhiko (2005); on the wall (of paradise) André (2006), compare also Ziebart (2015); on the action of seeing Noguiera (2006); on running Dushin (2008); on throwing Heller (2012).

2 On this question, also compare Stünkel (2025b).

3 On further metaphorization (*Weitermetaphorisierung*) compare Simonis (2024, par. 2–3, 41 and 49) and Krech (2024, par. 7).

Investigating Cusanus' metaphors, one should not only inquire which metaphors are used in the texts of analysis but also how they are employed i.e., in which ways they are introduced, established, and developed in their respective textual contexts. As has been often remarked in linguistic and philological studies (e.g., [Cameron 2008](#); [Donoghue 2014](#), 37–39, 51), metaphors are not fixed or static entities. Rather, they can undergo various kinds of changes and developments. Thus, borrowed metaphors, in particular, are often adapted or reinterpreted as they enter into the receiving text (see, for example, the metaphor of 'beryl' in [Fiamma 2025](#); or 'mill' in [Ranff 2025](#) in the present volume). The dynamic potential of verbal images is therefore of special relevance to exegetic texts and commentaries and is also reflected upon in corresponding philosophical discussions ([Roling 2007](#), 202–3). For example, certain key images of the bible (as, for instance, the image of bread in John 6, 11) are refigured and elaborated on in Cusanus' texts. It is a further aim to retrace how Cusanus reshapes such key metaphors from the biblical and, possibly, other major primary texts in continued or further metaphorization. [7]

In pursuing this line of inquiry, it might be useful to reconsider the famous claim put forth by Erich Auerbach in his seminal study *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (1971) that the literature of early Christianity, in particular the texts of the New Testament, opened up the possibility of a new way of depicting the simple, everyday life of ordinary people thus giving weight and significance to this semantic domain as a theme of literary and historical writing. If Cusanus' engagement with this semantic field as a genuine source of religious writing invites us to resume Auerbach's thesis, it may at the same time suggest a modification of that famous contention. For, as far as we can gather from the texts, the images of everyday life as they are used do not appear to dismiss or replace the language and semantic repertoire of ancient literature. Rather, in borrowing their images from both Christian/ biblical and ancient sources, they seem to attempt to synthesize both traditions with the aim of attaining a more rich and effective mode of metaphoric expression. [8]

## Overview

With one exception, the articles of this special issue were firstly presented among others<sup>4</sup> at the workshop "Exploring the Cosmos: Unraveling Cusanus' Metaphors" that took place on 15th and 16th June 2023, at Ruhr University Bochum, Center for Religious Studies and was organized by the [Subproject C03 "Metaphors of Every-day Life"](#) of the Collaborative Research Center 1475 "Metaphors of Religion." The presenters approached the complexity and intricacy of Cusanus' metaphors by investigating a range of test cases, mainly texts or passages whose imagery is borrowed from the domains of the arts and sciences and of everyday practices (for a detailed report on the workshop, see [Simonis](#) [9])

4 The other presentations were: Il Kim, "Cusanus' Scientific Observations of the Physical World: The Most Direct Metaphorical Approach Toward the Divine," David C. Albertson, "Problems of the Infinite Line in Nicholas of Cusa," and Witalij Morosow, "Wege wagen mit Cusanus: Alchemistische Metaphorik des lateinischen Mittelalters in Rezepten, Dialogen und Predigten des deutschen Denkers des 15. Jahrhunderts."

and Stünkel 2023). Some colleagues agreed to have their presentations published as an article in the context of this special issue of the Metaphor Papers.

**Elizabeth Brient** is concerned with Cusanus' geometrical and aesthetic experiments. [10] Her article "Exploding Metaphors: Reflections on the Methodology of Cusanus' Divine Metaphorics" (2025) focuses primarily on the figure of the circle and its three-dimensional counterpart, the sphere. In this context, she scrutinizes a specific technique of Cusanus' way of handling these figures, a device she (following Hans Blumenberg) calls 'exploding metaphors' as opposed to analogical or mapping metaphors that elucidate something unfamiliar or elusive by referring it analogically to something else already well known or familiar (compare Brient 2011). Exploding metaphors, Brient insistently argues, do not aim at the integration of the unfamiliar into the domain of the already familiar; they do not aim at conceptual clarity or contextual understanding but rather at a radically transformed state of awareness opening new possibilities of thinking.

Accordingly, in Cusanus' thought experiment, the figure of the circle is set in motion in a way that turns it into an 'exploding metaphor.' As a mathematical concept, the figure of the circle is a finite figure that is defined as the set of points that are at equal distance from its center. An infinite circle, by contrast, would imply a radius of infinite length, which would be impossible to measure. The idea of an infinite circle thus presents a paradox: It goes beyond the limit of what can be rationally conceived. In his thought experiment, however, Cusanus tries to imagine such a paradoxical figure: he envisages the circle as a figure in infinite space and imagines it to expand infinitely. This process of infinite expansion finally leads to the explosion of the figure: by expanding into the infinite space, the circle loses the very features that constitute its geometrical specificity. The process of dissolution into the infinite at work here is enhanced when Cusanus further elaborates his experiment by shifting the angle of vision and multiplying the points in space which can constitute the center of the imagined expanding circles and spheres: Indeed, any point in the infinite space offers a potential center of an infinitely expanding circle or sphere. Thus, the paradox of the infinite circle becomes even more challenging and incongruous by the additional operation of its infinite shifting and multiplication. [11]

By playing with these virtual and dynamic geometrical settings, Cusanus probes into the limits of our mental faculties and pushes them to the extreme. Similar to his meditations on the infinite line, Cusanus' 'exploding' metaphors of circles and lines are not merely destructive but productive at the same time, as a challenge and stimulant to our thought and visual imagination. Likewise, the idea of the omnivoyant gaze in *De visione dei* follows the same general method of constructing explosive metaphors. Here, the devotional exercise connected to the all-seeing icon becomes the dynamic enactment of an exploding metaphor. Metaphors here make sense by performatively showing the limits of rational sense-making and providing an ever-challenging method for further elaboration. [12]

In his article "*Per beryllum intueamur*. The Metaphor of 'Beryl' in Nicholas of Cusa and [13]



the Cologne School in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries,” (2025) **Andrea Fiamma** concentrates on the particular use of metaphor in Cusanus’ *De beryllo* and its intellectual context. In this book, Cusanus uses the metaphor of ‘beryl’ to exemplify the functioning of the human mind. The article aims at verifying the hypothesis of the existence of a philosophical tradition that used the metaphor of ‘beryl’ to illuminate some aspects of Albert the Great and his pupils’ theories of knowledge, and, thus, to understand its further development through to Nicholas of Cusa. By doing so, the author allows us to witness a process of continued or further metaphorization (*Weitermetaphorisierung*) over time as performed by an ongoing diachronic philosophical discussion. Metaphors, thus, can be described as elements of historical processes.

Fiamma firstly analyzes the use Cusanus makes of this metaphor, aiming at clarifying [14] the function of knowledge in the beatific vision (*visio beatifica*). Whoever were to look at the world through the material, handmade object that is beryl, could abandon the logic of the finite and rise to a *visio absoluta*. To Cusanus, we need to apply the intellectual beryl (*intellectualis beryllus*) to our intellectual eyes (*intellectualibus oculis*), for only the viewer who looks at the world *per beryllum* can see as it is—that is, without bending it to the criteria of finite cognitive structures.

As Cusanus took the metaphor of the ‘beryl’ from Albert the Great’s *De mineralibus*, [15] Fiamma, building on his previous studies on the subject, then sets forth to evaluate affinities and differences in the use of the metaphor of beryl among Nicholas of Cusa and Albert the Great, and other German Dominicans of the Cologne School, including Meister Eckhart, Theodoric of Freiberg and the Carmelite Hane. Here, Fiamma points at an interesting feature of processes of further metaphorization, in which the same metaphor might be used for an opposite explanatory goal. While Hane intends to illustrate a model of a soul so *passive* before God that it becomes transparent and makes room for Him, Cusanus believes that knowledge “*per beryllum*” on the contrary reveals an *active* soul that is induced to strive to see God more clearly. Nevertheless, Fiamma is able to follow the development of a textual tradition for which the beryl was a useful and developing metaphor illustrating the functioning of human knowledge as related to God.

**Viki Ranff** conducts a close reading of a particular set of significant everyday [16] metaphors in her article “Mill, Miller and Grinding as Theological Comparisons and Metaphors in Cusanus’ Sermones” (2025). In six of his sermons and here on ten occasions, the notions of mill, miller, and grinding are employed to illustrate Cusanus’ theological ideas. Evaluating Cusanus’ use of metaphor, Ranff argues that by employing the metaphors of mill and grinding, Cusanus, though being familiar with these everyday objects and processes, does not seem to be making an expert judgement.

However, these metaphors are instrumental in manifold contexts and are not deter- [17] mined to express a particular message with regard to a positive or a negative lesson. On the first occasion, Cusanus uses the metaphor of the ‘mill’ (*Sermo IX*); for example, the mill wheel turning inexorably and yet not moving from its place represents the insatiability of the greedy man as the visual impression of high-speed idling shapes the metaphor of ultimately useless toil. On the other hand, the mills mentioned in *Sermo*

XLI stand for the potentized and humanly refined abundance of natural gifts as a comparison and model of the supernatural gifts of grace. From this sermon, it could be gathered that ground flour is also a metaphor for supernatural gifts. However, there is an interesting ambiguity in Cusanus' use of the metaphors of grinding, as there is also the grinding performed by the mill of human teeth. This bodily metaphor holds a middle position between the domain of food production and the domain of spiritual recreation. The teeth are the body's mill, which grinds the food like the mill grinds the grain and like the Spirit grinds the Word of God until it makes the nutritious contents available to the body or spirit to be nourished. The finer the teeth grind, the higher the quality of the food—metaphorical for the spiritual life of the human being, which can expect coarser or finer quality from the spiritual grinding process.

Cusanus is in a tradition of metaphor use, in a process of further metaphorization, even if he may not have known it. Ranff stresses the interesting fact that Cusanus did not use the well-known metaphor of the 'mystical mill' in his sermons. Nevertheless, as Ranff concludes, the fact that Cusanus uses the metaphors of mill, miller, and grinding in his *Sermones* to describe spiritual and mental content manually and technically shows once again his practical and nature-related interest as well as his ability to draw spiritual benefits from these processes—even if natural or technical processes on the one hand and metaphorical transmission on the other “do not always mesh as precisely as the gears of a mill.” [18]

In a somewhat consistent continuation of Ranff's analysis of metaphors connected to the process of producing food, **Phoenix Savapakarn** (“‘Metabolism’ as Metaphor of Appropriation in Nicholas of Cusa's *Sermones*,” 2025) reflects on Cusanus' employment of metaphors that may be linked to metabolic processes. When he uses metaphors of nourishment in order to convey the process of appropriation i.e., incorporating the unknown or the Divine to familiarize it with the (kn)own, Cusanus seems to conceptualize 'reception' as a digestive process that has to be prepared skillfully, then executed and performed. Parallel to the biological catabolic process to prepare the constructive process of anabolism, the allegory of the baker making bread out of the grain consists of processes of selection of nourishing ingredients, breaking down components, separating the nutritious from the inedible to finally produce digestible food, which in analogy portrays the activity of a preacher (like Cusanus himself), selecting verses from the Scriptures, then elaborately composing a sermon to be performed for the audience to receive the Word of God. [19]

The fact that these metaphors appear to distinguish particular locations for digestive steps to take place raises the question of whether Cusanus' understanding of biochemical-like processes stems from the alchemistic or Galenic teachings. Thus, Savapakarn assumes that warmth or heat (*calor*) on a physical level, as well as love (*caritas, amor*) on a spiritual level, operate like catalysts when applying the metaphors of incorporation and transformation to the digestive system. [20]

Furthermore, Savapakarn stresses that Cusanus' explanations in *Sermo XLI* also imply an important self-reflexive, poetological dimension: Cusanus astonishingly instructs how [21]



to compose a sermon in a sermon, i.e., in a text of the very same genre. The auto-reflexive elaboration reveals three necessary components in three required steps: The subject of action (e.g. baker, preacher), the action (e.g. making bread, composing sermon), and the resulting product of the action (e.g. bread, sermon). By parallelizing activities of everyday life-occupations to his profession as a preacher, Cusanus again technically breaks down well-known structures of general knowledge to build up or present something new to the recipients, making similarities plausible by means of metaphorization.

In his concluding article, *Light, Brooms of Confession, and Drops of Oil on Thick Paper—Cusanus' Every-day Metaphors* (2025a) **Knut Martin Stünkel** points out that remarkable or successful metaphors are not necessarily bound to the extraordinary. Everyday metaphors, if employed in intellectual contexts, always contain an element of surprise and an impression of inadequateness. Nevertheless, as throughout his work, Cusanus shows a remarkable affinity to matters of everyday life. Cusanus's everyday metaphors also play a significant role in his philosophical treatises, his letters, and his sermons. [22]

In modern philosophical analysis, Stünkel argues, everyday life is characterized by a combination of concreteness and typicality; that is, it comprises forms of action that are both common and an essential element of one's individuality. As Martin Heidegger, on the one hand, has shown, everyday objects unfold a particular context of indication: they have a world. At the same time, as Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann stress on the other hand, it is only in everyday *Lebenswelt* that a common communicative environment can emerge. Thus, everyday life becomes the precondition for communication and religious communication in particular. [23]

Stünkel suggests a preliminary and tentative typology of everyday metaphors in Cusanus' works that is based on the difference of abstraction and concreteness. By using very concrete metaphors, Cusanus connects his considerations to the sphere of concrete experience of his audiences, thus fulfilling an intricate task of providing familiarity with a line of thought that is very often far from being familiar and well-known. However, it is not only objects that come to metaphorical use in Cusanus' thinking. Common processes and actions might be religious metaphors as well. Accordingly, everyday metaphors re-individualize the common routines as a special way of intellectually getting closer to God. They connect the transcendent sphere not merely to the immanent but, more specifically, to a sphere that is well known, at hand, and—perhaps—self-evident. Thus, they make religion as communication possible. [24]

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