
The metaphysics of language in Cusanus and Gadamer

La metafísica del lenguaje en el Cusano y Gadamer

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Abstract: This paper discusses Gadamer's interpretation of Cusanus' concept of *verbum* focusing on three metaphysical problems: pantheism, the spirit as image of God, Being as the word. First, the understanding of God as creative word offers the right balance between transcendence and presence within creation. Second, the *verbum* envisions a subjectivity that mirrors the spontaneity and creativity of the divine word. Third, the concept of Being is wired with a theory of creation rooted in the divine dynamic interiority, which manifests itself in the emergence of the *verbum*.

Keywords: Language, metaphysics, hermeneutics, divine word.

Resumen: Este artículo discute la interpretación gadameriana del concepto cusano de *verbum*, en relación con tres problemas metafísicos: panteísmo, el espíritu como imagen de Dios, el Ser como palabra. Primero, la comprensión de Dios como palabra creadora ofrece el equilibrio correcto entre trascendencia y presencia en la creación. Segundo, el *verbum* concibe una subjetividad que refleja la espontaneidad y creatividad de la palabra divina. Tercero, el concepto de Ser está conectado con una teoría de la creación arraigada en la interioridad dinámica divina, que se manifiesta a sí misma en la emergencia del *verbum*.

Palabras clave: Lenguaje, metafísica, hermenéutica, verbo divino.

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The philosophy of the 20th century was dominated by the so called linguistic turn. This turn is not, though, entirely new. The high importance of language had been stressed already in medieval philosophy and theology, which transposed the Greek *logos* into the tradition of the *verbum* that reflected the Christian revelation. How does philosophy change if we conceive it as being concentrated in the figure of language? I will try to answer this question from the perspective of Gadamer's reading of the medieval tradition. Gadamer believes that the medieval *verbum* is well equipped to face some crucial challenges of metaphysics: the relation between God and the created world, the question of Being, the question of the human mind. Medieval thinkers like Augustine, Aquinas or Cusanus have built up a conception of language that is intimately linked with such questions. In this paper I will restrict my analysis to Gadamer's reading of Cusanus, because his writings on the cardinal from Cues explicitly connect the challenges of metaphysics with the issue of the divine and human language.

Why should language become the eminent way into metaphysics? Gadamer refers in his text *Nicolaus Cusanus and the Present*¹ to three points: the problem of pantheism, the spirit as image of God, and Being as the word. I will show how these points connect to a more general evaluation of the possibility of metaphysics from the perspective of hermeneutics, as laid down by Gadamer in the aftermath of his teacher Heidegger. The hermeneutics of *verbum* is not focused on the immanent analysis of propositions in terms of logical and grammatical structures, but it rather captures *verbum* as the underlying principle of world creation and world order, and, at the human level, as the vessel of Being. Second, the hermeneutics of *verbum* inserts language into the relation between man and God and elaborates an existential view of man understood as creative being. The hermeneutic linguistic turn has thus a theological-metaphysical nature as well as an existential import inspired by the medieval *verbum*.

1. H.G. GADAMER, *Nicolaus Cusanus and the Present*, transl. Ted George, "Epoché" 7/1 (2002) 71-79.

Cusanus, Gadamer shows, is a late discovery of our historical consciousness. The German Romantics' return to tradition did not consider Cusanus; it was only in the 19th century that Cusanus was first studied by Neokantians. The interest of Neokantians was moved mainly by epistemology and natural sciences. They saw in Cusanus a thinker whose philosophical and theological insights had paved the way to modern philosophy (namely to Kant) and to modern science. This type of interest is nonetheless different from the speculative interest that our century has in Cusanus. In 1940, Ernst Hoffmann saw in Cusanus no longer the predecessor of Kant, but the speculative thinker that influenced the German idealism and the quasi pantheistic worldview of Goethe. The Heidelberg critical edition of Cusanus's complete works brought into light the interdependence of philosophy and theology in his thoughts. The Cusanian epistemology must therefore be approached not only from the methodological perspective of modern sciences (as Neokantians have done), but also from the point of view of the theological knowledge of God. The actuality of Cusanus lies not only in the relevance of his thought for modern science, but also in his ability to hold together philosophical and theological issues in a new way².

Starting from this speculative influence, hermeneutics should seek in Cusanus answers to some questions of the contemporary metaphysics. Heidegger's groundbreaking critique of the classic metaphysics (defined as onto-theology) calls for a new evaluation of the possibility of metaphysics as such. It is indeed the heated debate on the overcoming of metaphysics that could prompt a reevaluation of the past and rediscovery of forgotten authors: "However, the voices of the past always become truly perceptible first when questions from the present are directed toward them"³.

Heidegger's critique of the philosophical tradition targets a basic type of reductionism in the understanding of Being, the most important philosophical question. Philosophy has from its very be-

2. H.G. GADAMER, *Epilog*, in R. HAUBST (ed.), *Nikolaus von Kues in der Geschichte des Erkenntnisproblems* (Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, Mainz, 1975) 277.

3. H.G. GADAMER, *Nicolaus Cusanus* cit., 71.

ginning asked the question of Being: what it means that something is, what is the is-ness of things. In this question lies already a danger, namely the possibility to confound the is-ness of entities with an entity. The major error that philosophy made, although it started by asking the right question, was precisely the identification of the Being of entities, their is-ness so to speak, with an entity present-at-hand, something that lies down in front of our eyes. This error can be already found in certain elements of Plato and Aristotle, then in the Scholastic metaphysics. In this scenario of the present-at-hand, God is an entity that produced the world as an external cause, a sort of mechanic producer. Heidegger sees in this god of onto-theology a god that cannot be approached with the religious fervour: man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god⁴. German idealism, although different from the Greek and Scholastic metaphysics, is just the subjectivist reversal of this idea of present-at-hand, so that the transcendental subject is nothing else than an instance that organizes and arranges entities present-at-hand.

Heidegger's critique of metaphysics was internalized by Gadamer with moderation. His respectful attitude toward tradition enabled him, indeed, to look for resources in the tradition that can solve such difficulties and allow hermeneutics to reshape philosophy on a new basis. In the following we will see how the three metaphysical issues that Gadamer identifies in Cusanus (pantheism, *imago Dei*, Word as Being) can offer a way to do metaphysics from the standpoint of a hermeneutic retrieval of the *verbum*.

1. THE PROBLEM OF PANTHEISM

The problem of pantheism has to do with God's presence in the world. It addresses the theistic difficulty to emphasize a creator who stands above His creatures but is, at the same time, present into His own creation. Pantheism has pushed the presence of God to an extreme: everything created is part of God, and God is in everything

4. M. HEIDEGGER, *Identity and Difference*, transl. & intr. Joan Stambaugh (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974) 72.

created. The universe and God are therefore identical in substance, a theory condemned by the first Vatican Council. The major representative of this type of thinking was Spinoza, although the term itself was coined later on, in the eighteenth century. The extreme position of pantheism turns against the Christian theological claim of the difference between God and His creation. While Cusanus was never ecclesiastically “charged” with the accusation of pantheism, his philosophy brings into play some elements close to pantheism. The theologian Johannes Wenck, his contemporary, attacked Cusanus’ *De docta ignorantia* on the basis of this supposedly latent pantheism, which Cusanus might have shared with Meister Eckhart. Cusanus responded to Wenck’s critical text *De ignota literatura* with a new text, *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, in which he also defended Meister Eckhart’s positions.

Whether Cusanus was a pantheist or not makes the object of many studies, among which Gadamer cites Ernst Hoffmann. On the one hand, Cusanus defends some expressions that could be suspected of pantheism (for instance *omnia in omnibus*); on the other hand, he maintains the distinction between creator and created. As Louis Dupré shows in his study *The Question of Pantheism from Eckhart to Cusanus*⁵, Cusanus maintains that God is *omne quod est* (all that is), but also pays attention to terminological accuracy, especially in regards to the use of Thomistic terms. Such use was indeed misleading in Eckhart, who brought it into confusion by identifying *esse* with essence. In naming God the *non aliud* (the not-other), Cusanus defines Him as *essentia essentiarum* (the essence of essences) or the *quidditas* of all things, or *forma formarum* (the form of all forms) or, alternatively, *forma omnium* (borrowed from John Scottus Eriugena). God is present as such in all creatures: “in all things God is all things even though He is none of these things”⁶.

5. L. DUPRÉ, *The Question of Pantheism from Eckhart to Cusanus*, in P. CASARELLA (ed.), *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance* (CUA Press, Washington, 2006) 74-88.

6. CUSANUS, *De li non aliud*, in J. HOPKINS, *Nicholas of Cusa on God as Not-Other: A Translation and an Appraisal of ‘De li non aliud’* (Banning Press, Minneapolis, 1983) 50-51. See also W. BEIERWALTES, *Cusanus und Proklos. Zum neuplatonischen*

The distance of this exemplarism from pantheism can be demonstrated, according to Louis Dupré, by two elements: the likeness and the image. These elements indicate God's relation with sensible things (likeness), respectively with the human being (image):

Likeness refers to the general presence of God in everything. But only in a spiritual being is that likeness an image of God. Though God's presence is always total, the mode of that presence varies according to the degree of participation. Intellectual beings participate at a higher degree in God's life, and they may increase their capacity of participation as they become more and more aware of their being images of God. This increase results from the mind's intellectual endeavors but also, and above all, from the infusion of divine grace. Yet no degree of participation reaches absolute unity between the mind and God. Cusanus maintains an insurmountable distinction between God and the created mind, and this places his position beyond any suspicion of pantheism⁷.

Cusanus' platonism is thus the main factor that 'saves' him from pantheism. His strong emphasis on the presence of God in the created things and in the human spirit has nonetheless nurtured the tendency of pantheism of German Idealism in its confrontation with the Christian heritage. The speculative idealism has directed the Cusanian idea of the world as unfolding from God's spirit towards a radical idealist position that identifies the essence of being with the spontaneity of the spirit.

However, the pantheism-debate regarding Cusanus is not relevant only for an evaluation, from a historical view point, of the pantheist tendency in German philosophy. Rather, the discussion

Ursprung des 'non aliud', in *Nicolò Cusano agli inizi del mondo moderno* (Atti del Congresso internazionale in occasione del V centenario della morte di Nicolò Cusano, Bressanone, 6-10 settembre 1964) (Sansoni, Florence, 1970) 137-140; E.A. WYLLER, *Zum Begriff 'non aliud' bei Cusanus*, in *Nicolò Cusano* cit., 419-443.

7. L. DUPRÉ, *op.cit.*, 86.

about pantheism shows the continuous need of philosophy to find an approach to God's relation to the world that is not limited to the automatic scheme producer/created. The relevance of this debate for contemporary metaphysics is easy to observe. The detached, mechanic divine producer that is depicted in Heidegger's critique of onto-theology must be challenged by a figure of the divine that infuses the creation with its power and plenitude. The question at stake is the relation between God, on the one hand, and created things, on the other hand. This relation receives an optimal explanation in Cusanus by means of the concept of *verbum*, the Latin translation of the Greek *logos*. The understanding of God as creative *verbum* could help us overcome the temptation of pantheism through the right balance between transcendence and presence within creation. The divine word smooths the transcendence of God; it is a manifestation of divine plenitude that culminates in the Incarnation of God in a human being, Jesus Christ.

Gadamer reads thus Cusanus' conception of the *verbum* as a possible answer to the problem of pantheism. This answer has important consequences on the understanding of the human spirit and on the understanding of the being of the created in general. We see therefore how the problem of pantheism opens up, through the metaphysics of language, a new anthropology and a new ontology; I will explore these features in the following two paragraphs.

2. THE SPIRIT AS IMAGE OF GOD

The focus on the divine word (*verbum*) is a new feature of Christianity, although *verbum* is of course nothing else than the Latin translation of the Greek *logos*. Cusanus was aware of this novelty in regards to the ancient Greek metaphysics that did not fully capture the life and dynamics of a divine word that is more than absolute necessity:

Indeed, the philosophers were not adequately instructed regarding the Divine Word and absolute Maximum. And so, they

envisioned mind and soul and necessity as present uncontractedly in a certain unfolding of Absolute Necessity⁸.

Cusanus tries to solve the difficulties of the Platonic theory of Forms through the pair of concepts *complicatio/explicatio*. *Complicatio* is the enfolding of the world in God's mind; the enfolded multiplicity is then unfolded, contracted (*explicatio*) in a diversity of created beings⁹. The relation between *complicatio* and *explicatio* can be explained through the analogy with the relation between the point and the line: the point is the enfolding of the line (it contains in itself the possibility of the line), while the line is the unfolding of the point.

In contrast with the pluralistic realm of platonic forms, the *complicatio* indicates one absolute form of forms, the Word of God:

Hence, the forms of things are not distinct except as they exist contractedly; as they exist absolutely they are one, indistinct [Form], which is the Word in God (...) For only one infinite Exemplar is sufficient and necessary; in it all things exist, as the ordered exists in the order. [This exemplar] very congruently enfolds all the essences of things, regardless of how different they are, so that Infinite Essence is the most true Essence of the circle and is not greater or lesser or different or other [than the circle] (...) Forms do not have actual existence except (1) in the Word as Word and (2) contractedly in things¹⁰.

The divine Word is therefore that through which God creates the world. God is present within His creation through His Word, God the Son, incarnated in Jesus. The procession of the Word (God the Son) from God's mind (God the Father) and the Incarnation of

8. CUSANUS, *De docta ignorantia*, in *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*, transl. J. Hopkins (Banning Press, Minneapolis, 2001) 86. On Cusanus' philosophy of language see: K.O. APEL, *Die Idee der Sprache bei Nicolaus von Cues*, in "Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte" 1 (1955) 200-221; J. B. ELPERT, *Loqui est revelare – Verbum ostensio mentis: Die sprachphilosophische Jagdzüge des Nikolaus Cusanus* (Lang, Frankfurt/M, 2002).

9. CUSANUS, *De docta* cit., II, Ch. 3.

10. CUSANUS, *De docta* cit., 85-86.

Jesus Christ are fundamental aspects of the tradition of the *verbum*. These aspects have for Gadamer a decisive metaphysical importance, in so far as they solve not only the challenge of pantheism, but also the question of the world-creation. God is not a neutral entity, but a personal God who speaks, who reveals Himself in His word. This spontaneity of God is, of course, different from the mechanic necessity of the Heideggerian *Deus artifex*. The onto-theology of the present-at-hand, of things that just lie down in front of us, must thus be contrasted with the metaphysics of *verbum* in which the human mind and the things themselves are vivified by the power of the word.

Let us start with the human spirit. The divine word empowers the human spirit, endows it with the creative force of language. The similarity between man and God is therefore a similarity of the Word. This is, according to Gadamer, the beginning of the entire essence of modernity¹¹. Language is not just a collection of words, but a dynamic force in which perspectives separate or conflate. In this context Gadamer makes an analogy with the Cusanian idea of perspective in painting:

The thought of point of view, of finite, fluctuant interchangeable point of view, gives an entirely new meaning to the thought of the individual-singular. The individual becomes the complementary concept to the universal. A given view, the image offered by things, in fact always depends just upon its respective point of view, and is to that extent not the whole and the true. Yet at the same time all points of view imply all views, and thus it is the one universal, the true being of which is not simply presented in them, but instead consists in them¹².

11. See also M. J. SOTO-BRUNA, *La recomposición del espejo. Análisis histórico-filosófico de la idea de expresión* (Eunsa, Pamplona, 1995) 166-195; P. CASARELLA, *Selbstgestaltung des Menschen nach Nikolaus von Kues und modernes Verständnis des Menschen: aufgezeigt an Hans-Georg Gadamer*, in K. KRÄMER (ed.), *Die Sermones des Nikolaus von Kues. Inhaltliche Schwerpunkte*, Series *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft*, vol. 31 (Paulinus, Trier, 2006) 29-52; P.M. WATTS, *Nicolaus Cusanus: A Fifteenth Century Vision of Man* (Brill, Leiden, 1982).

12. H.G. GADAMER, *Nicolaus Cusanus* cit., 76. See also M. E. MOORE, *Nicholas of*

Cusanus refers to a painting of Rogier van der Weyden that helps Gadamer make his point. The peculiarity of this painting lies in the gaze of the pictured figure, who seems to look at the viewer no matter what his position is. The perspectivism of the position of the viewer (which can change spatially in many ways) encounters the continuity of the gaze, which allows the viewer a direct confrontation with the being of the painting itself. In this experience, the viewer encounters the painting but also himself. Gadamer speaks about an encounter of the spirit with itself but underlines that it is not a matter of subjectivism or relativism, but rather a spiritual experience in which the human spirit becomes aware of what it is precisely through the encounter with the divine:

...here the subject, the I, is adapted to the structural relation of the relative, and his ascent above the relative, his *vis creativa*, which allows him to construct his image of the world on the basis of his spirit, does not make him a God, but instead leads him to understand himself in terms of the divine incarnation in Jesus Christ. Cusanian anthropology is Christology¹³.

The figure that looks at the viewer recalls the idea of a divine seeing which is actively orientated towards creatures¹⁴. The artistic perspectivism is but an *analogon* to the linguistic perspectivism, which is manifested not only in the diversity of national languages, but also in the inner diversity that inhabits each language. Each language is indeed shaped by a pluralism of meaning: there are words that have more different meanings, like the French “bois,” which means

Cusa and the Kairos of Modernity: Cassirer, Gadamer, Blumenberg (Punktum Books, Brooklyn, 2013) 64.

13. H.G.GADAMER, *Nicolaus Cusanus* cit., 76. On Cusanus' Christology see R. MAJERAN, *Christology as the Keystone of Cusanus' Vision: Book Three of the De Docta Ignorantia*, in A. KIJEWKA & R. MAJERAN (eds.), *Eriugena-Cusanus* (Lublin, 2011) 277-289.
14. On the divine seeing: M. J. SOTO-BRUNA, *Die Schöpfung des Endlichen als "Sehen Gottes": Cusanus (De visione Dei) und Johannes Scotus Eriugena*, in A. KIJEWKA, R. MAJERAN (eds.), *Eriugena-Cusanus* cit., 149-170; A. KIJEWKA, *Etymology and Philosophy: God as 'videns et currens'*, in A. KIJEWKA, R. MAJERAN (eds.), *Eriugena-Cusanus* cit., 117-134.

both wood and forest. This pluralism does not, however, cut off the relation between words and references, in the same way in which the gaze of the pictured figure is not undermined by the positional change of the viewer.

Gadamer builds upon this theological and metaphysical valorization of language in the last part of his masterpiece *Truth and Method*. Cusanus' philosophy is inspiring and useful particularly on a matter of strategic importance for hermeneutics: the concept formation (*Begriffsbildung*). The linguistic concept formation proves that language is not just a tool of thinking, as the Greeks and the Moderns have believed. On the contrary, language and thinking are organically bound, and language is crucial for the creativity of the human spirit. Here Gadamer introduces the Cusanian concept '*vocabulum naturale*' meant to indicate precisely the spontaneity of language within thinking. This is the last step that Gadamer takes at the end of *Truth and Method* in order to articulate an ontology of language. It follows a previous discussion of the concept of mental language (*verbum mentis*, *verbum interius*) in Augustine and Aquinas; in this way, Gadamer establishes a continuity between the Augustinian-Thomistic *verbum interius* and the Cusanian *vocabulum naturale*. Such continuity is generally overseen, with few exceptions¹⁵, in the scholarship on the medieval tradition of inner language. It is Gadamer's merit to bring into full light the force of this tradition in the passage from Medieval to Renaissance philosophy. I have previously analyzed in detail Gadamer's reading of the "mental language" from Augustine to Cusanus¹⁶. I will focus here on the relevance of this concept for the metaphysical question of the similarity between divine and human mind.

The "inner word" is employed by Augustine and Aquinas in order to give an intelligible account of the Trinity¹⁷. There is an

15. J. HENNIGFELD, *Verbum-Signum. La définition du langage chez St. Augustin et Nicolas de Cues*, "Archives de Philosophie" 54 (1991) 255-268.

16. M. OLIVA, *Das innere Verbum in Gadamer's Hermeneutik* (Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2009).

17. See the reference work of Claude Panaccio on the history of inner language: C. PANACCIO, *Le discours intérieur. De Platon à Guillaume d'Ockham* (Seuil, Paris,

analogy between the human word and the second person of the Trinity, the Son. The outspoken human word (*verbum prolatum*) originates from an inner word in the same way in which the incarnate Jesus is conductible to the second person of the Trinity; additionally, the human inner word proceeds from thinking in the same way in which God the Son proceeds within the Trinity. The inner and the outspoken word are not two different words, but two aspects of language, in the same way in which Jesus and the second person of the Trinity are one and the same person. While the human outspoken word always takes the form of a particular language (English, Spanish, Russian), the inner word is independent from any national language. It is a process within the human thought that makes possible the manifestation outwards, in a national language.

Augustine spells out this process through the dynamic triads *memoria-intellegentia-voluntas* and *mens-notitia-amor* whose individual terms correspond to the three persons of the Trinity (*memorial/mens* to the Father, *intellegentia/notitia* to the Son, *voluntas/amor* to the Holy Spirit). The dynamic relation of the three members of the triads ensues as an inner word, an inner language. The *verbum cordis* constitutes therefore the inner dynamism of the Trinity as *cum amore notitia*:

This word is conceived in love, whether it be the word of the creature or the word of the Creator, that is, of a changeable nature or of the unchangeable truth. (...) But the word is born when that which is thought pleases us, either for the purpose of committing sin or of acting rightly. Love, therefore, as a means, joins our word with the mind from which it is born; and as a third it binds itself with them in an incorporeal embrace, without any confusion¹⁸.

1999). See also G. KLIMA (ed.), *Intentionality, Cognition, and Mental Representation in Medieval Philosophy* (Fordham University Press, New York, 2014).

18. AUGUSTINE, *On the Trinity. Books 8-15*, Book IX, 8.13, ed. G.B. Matthews, transl. S. McKenna (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002) 34-35.

At the human level, such inner language is prior to any national, particular language — the *verbum prolatum*. It represents the inner dynamism of language itself, not a primary language ‘before language’. The distinction between an inner and outer language does not introduce therefore a second language. It rather captures the dynamism of language under two aspects: the inner and the outer. Gadamer’s interest for the doctrine of mental language targets mainly this dynamic character of language. Contrary to some contemporary analytic theories of mental language (such as Jerry Fodor’s language of thought), he puts less emphasis on the compositional structure of language, preferring to focus on the emergence of language from thought. His preference might be read as a metaphysical option: the question of the emergence of language is indeed a foundational question, that ultimately reflects the wonder about language: Why do we speak? Such option distinguishes the hermeneutics of the inner language from other mental language theories, particularly from compositionism (that considers mental language as structure of thought) or representationalism (that considers the mental language as conceptual representation)¹⁹.

It should be noted though that this dynamism remains bound to the linguistic reference, for language does not express the spirit but the intended object. Language represents the creativity of the human spirit as image of God; such creativity operates in relation to the world to which we belong and not in separation from it. The connection between the inner dynamism of language and the linguistically expressed object is preserved in Aquinas²⁰, who brings the concept of inner word to a full technical description. Aquinas evolves from the analysis of the relation between *verbum mentis* and *species intelligibilis* in *Scriptum super Libros Sententiarum* to a more

19. Stephan Meier-Oeser distinguishes between pictorialist and propositionalist theories of mental language. See S. MEIER-OESER, *Sprache und Bilder im Geist. Skizzen zu einem philosophischen Langzeitprojekt*, “Philosophisches Jahrbuch” (Alber, Freiburg/München, 2004) 313.

20. Y. FLOUCAT, *L’intime fécondité de l’intelligence. Le verbe mental selon Saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Téqui, Paris, 2001) 111; R. PASNAU, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997) 254-271.

elaborated description of the emergence of the inner word in the later works (*Summa contra gentiles*, *Summa theologiae* etc). Although it is a mediator between thought and known object, the inner word is not a third term, but a process that abides in the speaker under the influence of love: “Hence, love also in ourselves is something that abides in the lover, and the word of the heart is something abiding in the speaker; yet with a relation to the thing expressed by word, or loved”²¹. Aquinas describes the emergence of the inner word as a peculiar act: an act from an act (*ut actus ex actu*):

In like manner, too, the word conceived by our intellect does not proceed from potency to act except in so far as the intellect proceeds from potency to act. For all that, the word does not arise in our intellect except as it exists in act; rather, simultaneously with its existence in act, there is a word conceived therein²².

The mental language is not a potency actualized after the act of thinking, but a process simultaneous with thinking. On the other hand, the word can be understood also as the result, the product of the intellectual act. Such ambivalence, Gadamer believes, is well captured by Aquinas’ use of the Neo-platonic concept of emanation in the description of the emergence of the inner word. Emanation is a peculiar type of process, in which what is emanated is identical with the process of emanation, the same way in which the water in a fountain is identical with the flow that moves the water up and down. Thus, the word is not the end-result of the act of knowledge, but is simultaneous with the formation of the intellect²³. In analogy with the inner-Trinitarian processions, the inner word designates therefore the procession of language from thought.

21. T. AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 37, a.1, transl. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, 1981) 189.

22. T. AQUINAS, *Summa contra gentiles*, book 4, transl. C. J. O’Neill (Notre Dame University Press, Notre Dame, 1975) 98.

23. H.-G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, transl. J. Weinsheimer (Continuum, London, 2007) 424.

Cusanus' concept of *vocabulum naturale* is quite similar to Augustine's and Aquinas' inner word. The natural name is united with the form of the thing and occurs by the operation of reason:

Nevertheless, the imposition of the name is made at will, since another name could have been imposed. Thus, although [the imposition is made] at will, nonetheless [the imposed name] is not *other* than, and not wholly different from, the natural name that is united to the form. Rather, after the advent of the form the natural name shines forth in all the various names imposed variously by all the different nations. Therefore the imposition of a name occurs by the operation of reason²⁴.

The *vocabulum naturale* takes the concept formation out of the classical logic of essence. The concept formation occurs not through a mere abstraction, but as a crucial element of what Gadamer calls a logic of experience, which can include even the supernatural experience. The logic of experience represents the concrete life of language which includes its history of meaning, its grammar, and its syntax. The primary natural way of concept formation is indeed encapsulated into the variations and games of meaning that take place in every lively language, following the various aspects of things, together with men's interests and needs. The scientific concept formation is only an abstract derivate from this linguistic process embedded in man's concrete life. Gadamer borrows here an example from Ernst Cassirer: there is an African language which has two hundred different words for camel, according to the camel's particular circumstances and relationships to the desert dwellers. The specific meanings that the reference "camel" receives in these linguistic occurrences make it seem to be an entirely different creature.

At the same time, it would be wrong to see language as purely accidental, for all denominations still refer to the same object. Gadamer underlines that it is the merit of Cusanus to find a mediation between the essential order of things and the linguistic variations

24. CUSANUS, *Idiota de mente*, in *Complete Philosophical cit.*, vol. 1, 539.

through the concepts of *vocabulum naturale* and *complicatio/explicatio*. His reconstruction of Cusanus' contribution to the tradition of mental language associates therefore the linguistic issue of *vocabulum naturale* to the metaphysical and theological conceptual pair *complicatio/explicatio*. At the human linguistic level, all languages are explications of the unity of the mind whose dynamism is constituted by the *vocabulum naturale*:

Accordingly, the multiplicity in which the human mind unfolds itself is not a mere fall from true unity and not a loss of its home. Rather, there has to be a positive justification for the finitude of the human mind, however much this finitude remains related to the infinite unity of the absolute being. This is prepared for in the idea of *complicatio*, and from this point of view the phenomenon of language also acquires a new aspect. It is the human mind that both complicates and explicates. The unfolding into discursive multiplicity is not only conceptual, but also extends into the verbal sphere. It is the variety of possible appellations — according to the various languages — that potentiates conceptual differentiation²⁵.

Gadamer's use of the *complicatio/explicatio* pair in defending Cusanus as belonging to the tradition of the mental language is consistent with his preference for an account of the mental language in terms of intellectual act, generation or emergence²⁶. Cusanus' *vocabulum naturale* enriches the tradition of the mental language through a grasp of the relation between the inner dynamism of the spirit and the pluralism of the outer language. While Augustine and Aquinas focus on the emergence of the inner word, Cusanus spells out also the relation between this emergence and the mul-

25. H.G. GADAMER, *Truth* cit., 435. See also H. G. GADAMER, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, in H. G. GADAMER, *Gesammelte Werke* (Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 1999) vol. 4, 59.

26. The relation between the Cusanian *complicatio/explicatio* and the procession of the mental language described by Augustine and Aquinas would deserve, I believe, a further analysis.

tiplicity of the national, outspoken languages. The multiplicity of the outer language is rooted in the inwardness of the mind, in the same way in which *explicatio* is rooted in *complicatio*. The creativity of the human spirit as image of God is thus grounded in the internal dynamism of the mental language and manifested in the plurality of the external language.

3. BEING AND WORD

Finally, the focus of metaphysics on the divine *verbum* has a crucial impact on the concept of Being. In this sense, Being is not anymore understood only from the standpoint of a present-at-hand which is seen through perception or intellectual intuition, but also from the possibility of hearing the word. Gadamer believes that Cusanus has fully grasped the revolutionary character of the metaphysics of *verbum*:

[H]e takes up a radical and critical position with regard to the central problem of scholasticism, the struggle carried out between the Platonists and Aristotelians, and even more so within Aristotelianism, concerning the manner of the being of the universal. He says that on the whole the ancients failed to understand properly the work of the Verbum, the word, and therefore also failed to understand the essence of creation. For the Verbum is the verbum creans; it is no mere adjunct to all forms of being and possibilities, as the ‘world-soul’ was for the ancients, but is instead the word created out of the will. In the end, the ancients were only able to think of the emergence of the world as the unfolding of a necessity — that is the limitation that they were incapable of overcoming, however much they would have liked, since Anaxagoras, to emphasize the ‘spirituality’ of the basis of the world²⁷.

27. H.G. GADAMER, *Nicolaus Cusanus* cit., 77. See also H.G. GADAMER, *Philosophisches Lesebuch 1* (Frankfurt, 1965) 324.

The medieval *verbum* is not a blind rational necessity, but a word animated by will. Augustine describes indeed the *verbum* as a procession within the triad *memoria-intellegentia-voluntas*, and, equivalently, within the triad *mens-notitia-amor*. *Voluntas* and *amor* — corresponding to the Holy Spirit — indicate therefore an element of spiritual affection of the *verbum* that was lacking in the Greek metaphysics of the *logos*. The question remains, however, if the shift to the inwardness of God as manifested in the *verbum* is really a step away from the insufficiency of Greek metaphysics. After all, this inwardness of God can hardly be approximated through our words and concepts: “Does Cusanus not save himself from the inadequacy of Greek metaphysics only by means of the flight into the inconceivability of the divine will and of God’s activity?”²⁸ In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer asks a similar question regarding Augustine’s and Aquinas’ theory of inner word:

One might well ask whether we are not here using the unintelligible to explain the unintelligible. What sort of word is it that remains the inner dialogue of thought and finds no outer form in sound? Does such a thing exist?²⁹

The novelty brought by the focus on the *verbum* is certainly not easy to digest philosophically. What does it mean, indeed, that Being is word?

Gadamer directs the problem of Being to the problem of world-creation. He claims that the expression *creatio ex nihilo* is still indebted to Greek metaphysics and logic and does not fully capture the originality of Christianity: “That is why it is only a formal description of the becoming of creation that is found in Greek negation, if one can name this a becoming out of nothingness”³⁰. The radical novelty of Christianity is the understanding of Creation through the word of God:

28. H.G. GADAMER, *Nicolaus Cusanus* cit., 77.

29. H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* cit., 421.

30. H.G. GADAMER, *Nicolaus Cusanus* cit., 78.

The ontological structure of *create*, of the creational, is different. It presents itself as the essence of the word. For this is the miracle of the word that, without making use of any beings, or transforming them, or casting them into new forms, it nevertheless makes present, calls into being³¹.

The understanding of creation through the Word of God that is present in the world has certainly a more dynamic and theophanic sense than the figure of a fully detached producer. Gadamer refers here to Cusanus' *De possest*, a text in which the lively action of the Word of God is frequently mentioned and in which Cusanus also introduces the innovative concept *possest*. Cusanus quotes Psalm 147, 15: "The Lord sends a command to earth, his word runs swiftly!" The Word of God is that by which God creates the world, maintains it into existence and saves it:

This is the supreme teaching of Christ, our only savior: viz., that He Himself, who is the word of God, through which God created the world, provides all the things which nature lacks — provides them in him who with unwavering faith receives Christ as the Word of God, so that he, believing by faith in which Christ is present, can do all things by means of the Word dwelling in him through faith³².

The Word of God has a revelatory character:

Assuredly, Omnipotence itself — which God, the creator and the father of all things, is — is revealed in the commanding Word of the Almighty, who speaks and it is done. Nor can Omnipotence itself be revealed in anything other than its Word³³.

31. H.G. GADAMER, *Nicolaus Cusanus* cit., 78.

32. CUSANUS, *De possest*, in *Complete Philosophical* cit., vol. 2, 931.

33. CUSANUS, *De possest* cit., 932.

The Word of God is a creative force which is not a simple disposition, but, as Gadamer argues, a constitution of Being. This constitution of Being, in turn, should not be understood as something already present, as *Vorhandenheit* in Heidegger's terms, nor as a collection or reserve of beings, but rather as *possest*, the infinite and unqualified condition of all being. Gadamer reads the Cusanian *possest* in close relation to the metaphysics of the word:

Even the expression 'creative' has this meaning, which indeed does not simply mean to be disposed to create or to be competent in creating, but instead indicates a constitution of being, which for its part is not anything already present, is no reserve of extant beings, but is itself a being-able [*Können*], that is, being that is not — and of course is also not not. In any case, something is meant here that is expressed only incompletely by the concepts *explicatio* and *complicatio*, and Cusanus is aware of this. He does not love the traditional expression of the *actus purus*, in which all *dynamis*, all *potentia*, is drowned in pure essence — he himself seeks the *posse* in being. To express this he ventures the bold word form *possest*, i.e., the total collapse into oneness of being-able and being, and at the summit of the meditation, as the summit of the meditation, being-able itself, the *posse ipsum*, appears to him ultimately as the infinite and unqualified condition of all being. To become cognizant of its own in all being is the great possibility of the human spirit. It is *intelligentia*. The internal reading of itself (*intus legere*) sees itself as being-able-to-be [*Seinkönnen*], but it likewise becomes aware in all being of that same persistence-in-being [*Sich-in-Sein-balten*] that is being-able³⁴.

Gadamer's appreciation of the role of the *possest* in the Cusanian metaphysics of *verbum* is undoubtedly influenced also by Heidegger's critique of the idea of a divine producer that reduces Being to that which is feasible. In *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*,

34. H.G. GADAMER, *Nicolaus Cusanus* cit., 78.

Heidegger claimed that the Thomistic concept of *actualitas* stems from the productive behavior of the Dasein, the human being, even though Aquinas was not, of course, aware of such an implicit genealogy. *Actus* and *actualitas* belong to the semantic family of *agere* (to act) and contain the cultural energy of the Roman civilization which was focused on efficiency and production³⁵. Gadamer takes probably the Cusanian *possest* as a compromise down the road of the ontology of *actus*. *Possest* is indeed an invention that keeps together *esse* and *posse*, and opens the path to an understanding of the divine in its rich manifestation. It would of course be wrong to conclude from here that God is potency. In God, actuality and possibility coincide; only in the created are they separated.

At the same time, it must be mentioned that Gadamer does rely heavily on the Thomistic notion of act in the analysis of *verbum mentis*. As I have shown elsewhere³⁶, this contradiction is only apparent. When Gadamer uses Aquinas' *actus* in order to describe the generation of the *verbum* within the Trinity, the accent falls on the inner-Trinitarian dynamics. *Possest* expresses a different nuance, namely the relation between God's interiority and creation. In Gadamer's use of the Cusanian *possest*, the accent falls not on the procession of the inner word (described as *actus*), but rather on the issue of the concept formation. This issue, as I have shown above, reflects the question of creation and of the relation between the divine unity and the multiplicity of the created. Thus the inner-Trinitarian processuality is described as act, whereas God in His relation with the creation is approached as *possest*.

35. M. HEIDEGGER, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, transl. A. Hofstadter (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1988) 101-105. On Gadamer's relation with Heidegger's critique of Aquinas see M. OLIVA, *Trinity and Difference: Gadamer and Heidegger on Aquinas*, "Jahrbuch für Religionsphilosophie" 13 (2014).

36. M. OLIVA, *Gadamer and Cusanus on Creation*, "Philosophy Today" 2/55 (2011) 184-191. The contrast between Aquinas' *actus* and Cusanus' *possest* is mitigated also by C. GIACON in *Il «possest» del Cusano e le dottrine aristotelico-tomistiche dell'atto e potenza e dell'essenza ed esistenza*, in *Nicolò Cusano cit.*, 375-384.

In conclusion, the medieval tradition of the *verbum* must be revisited in order to address the challenges of modern metaphysics, which Gadamer sums up in three major points: the problem of pantheism (i.e., the problem of God's presence in the world), the question of subjectivity, and the question of Being. The metaphysics of *verbum* articulated by Cusanus can open up an understanding of God's spontaneity in creation, but also of God's active presence in His own created world. Second, it claims the force of the human spirit as *imago Dei*; such force is not random and self-destructing, but rather follows the model of its own creator, the divine spirit. Third, it makes possible the understanding of Being in a mode different than the one of the presence-at-hand, which, as Heidegger has argued, is an ontological impoverishment. The concept of Being is wired with a theory of creation rooted in the divine dynamic interiority, which manifests itself in the emergence of the *verbum*.