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GERGELY BAKOS

Jos Decorte: A Humble Interpreter of Cusanus

On the Use and Abuse of the Mediaeval episteme

“philosophy is based on the experience of openness”¹

I

Classically our possible frameworks and methodologies for understanding mediaeval thought have been threefold, i.e. Neo-Scholasticism or Neo-Thomism, analytic philosophy and intellectual history or hermeneutics.² Each of these approaches has their respective strengths and weaknesses.

The positive side of the Neo-Scholastic or Neo-Thomistic approach can be seen first of all in the impetus it gave to the critical editions of mediaeval texts—admittedly not just from Aquinas. This movement produced original thinkers such as Étienne Gilson (1884–1978), Jacques Maritain (1882–1973) and others. It fostered dialogue with modern science and had a systematic character with an exact conceptual framework. On the other hand its overall reliance on Aristotelian ontology is problematic both for anthropology and theology.³ Aquinas’ thought as revived by the Neo-Scholastics became an intellectual weapon against the perceived dangers of modernity. The danger lurking behind this approach is the simplification for

¹ MEZEI, M. Balázs: *Radical Revelation. A Philosophical Approach*. London: Bloomsbury 2017, 340.

² For a more detailed treatment see BAKOS, Gergely T.: *On Faith, Rationality and the Other in the Late Middle-Ages*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock 2011, especially 3–29 and 313–330, and BAKOS, Gergely: *How to Think the Otherness of Medieval Thought? On Decortian Hermeneutics*, in: *Sapientiana* 8 (2015) 2, 40–60.

The identification of intellectual history with hermeneutics *tout court* would need more careful qualification. The Decortian approach lies not far from hermeneutics—indeed my term *existential hermeneutics* betrays this kinship. Here I can only refer to the late László Tengelyi (1954–2014)—a great reader of Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur—who observed that in his hermeneutical thinking Gadamer wants to stay close to life, yet it is not entirely clear to what this intended closeness amounts to.

I also leave out intentionally John Marenbon’s approach, although his stance is close to a Decortian one and certainly deserves another study. Cf. MARENBON, John: *Pagans and Philosophers. The Problem of Paganism from Augustine to Leibniz*. Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press 2015. See also his Inaugural Lecture as Honorary Professor of Medieval Philosophy in the University of Cambridge, delivered on November 30th, 2011: <https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1810/240658/Marenbon%20Inaugural%20lecture.pdf;jsessionid=8447B97073C2345AED9B7C45F8E8AB2F?sequence=1> (19.04.2017).

³ That is to ask the following questions: Can we really think a human being as a substance? Can we think the Trinitarian God otherwise than fundamentally as a relation?

the sake of apologetics and theological rationalism.⁴ Sociologically speaking it even seems clear that the Neo-Scholastic movement lost the official institutional support of the Catholic Church.⁵

The positive dimension of analytic philosophy can be seen in its philosophical modesty and democratic style.⁶ Its use of modern logic and semantic analysis makes this approach similar to much of the mediaeval philosophical-theological discussion. It can be also added that in spite of its origins in the Vienna circle, there developed a respectable part of analytic philosophy dedicated to rational theology.⁷ A general problem of the analytic approach though was its lack of historical sensitivity, that is to say not studying texts within their original context. It goes without saying that because of our cultural distance from the Middle Ages this ahistorical attitude is especially dangerous when it accompanies the interpretation of mediaeval texts.

Intellectual history or a hermeneutical approach tries to amend this fault by recognizing the importance of the historical context for understanding a philosophical debate or a particular position. The danger here, however, may be on the one hand historical relativism, on the other an antiquarian, self-serving, self-absorbed, weak or faint-hearted attitude—a Nietzschean verdict to which I shall come back in the second part of my paper.

Here I only want to place an important note to us university professors. We should not forget that our students keep asking questions like the following ones: Why study this (mediaeval) text? For instance, what does Aquinas have to do with us here and now? Equally important questions can come from our employers: Why pay someone to study for example Ockham or Hegel? And why sponsor philosophy at all?⁸

Jos Decorte's suggestion can be understood as a corrective: what we can term as an *existential hermeneutics*.⁹ This approach has a threefold focus: the existential importance of knowledge, its symbolic-religious and finalistic, teleological character.¹⁰ From a medieval point of view, knowledge

⁴ This story did not start in the 19th century though, but much earlier.

⁵ ROSEMANN, Philip W.: *Understanding Scholastic Thought with Foucault*. Hampshire: Macmillan 1999, 4.

⁶ Cf. Edmund Gettier's famous paper (*Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?* 1963). These three pages started a discussion that could fill volumes.

⁷ See e.g. Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, John Haldane and Analytic Thomism. One can even speak of Aquinas' reception in this tradition, see e.g. Elizabeth Anscombe, Peter Geach, Anthony Kenny.

⁸ As I gather, this latter one is certainly a real question in the US and also in my own country, Hungary.

⁹ The term existential hermeneutics is mine, not Decorte's.

¹⁰ Cf. DECORTE, Jos: *Sapientia: Between Superbia and Vanitas*, in: BROWN, Stephen F. (ed.): *Meeting of the Minds. The Relations between Mediaeval and Classical Modern European Philosophy*. Turnhout: Brepols 1998, 477–506; DECORTE, Jos: *Geschichte und Eschatologie*.

must have an importance for one's life: *sapientia* lies between *vanitas* and *superbia*. For mediaevals, knowledge is about seeing God (*visio Dei*) and attaining happiness (*beatitudo*). Its symbolic character can be captured with the help of the following formula: $S - X \rightarrow Y$, that is to say for the human subject S the visible X is a sign or symbol of or a pointer towards the reality of the invisible reality of Y .¹¹ Admittedly, the finalistic or teleological character of mediaeval knowledge was spelled out in terms of Aristotelian science, but it was also an expression of a fundamental Christian and human intuition.¹²

Compared to Neo-Thomism Decortian existential hermeneutics respects the Aristotelian framework of mediaeval thought precisely as a framework, without itself being committed to it. It thinks humans as relational.¹³ By concentrating on the knowing-how, it avoids (theological) rationalism and it is not directly concerned with Christian apologetics. It can be called a Christian philosophy, however, but its emphasis lies on the form of knowledge, that is to say on the question of how to go about your knowledge, how to use it, how to relate to it, how to contribute with it to human well-being, virtue and maturity.¹⁴ Thus if this is a Christian philosophy, it is not simply because it is concerned with the contents of Christian faith.¹⁵ On the other hand, this way of reading and making (existential) sense of (mediaeval) philosophical texts can still be seen as doing autonomous philosophy. Although, theologically speaking, the *visio Dei* (as a gift) is still dependent on divine grace, according to Saint Paul it is a basic human possibility—even for non-Christians.¹⁶ The vision is a limited insight into the mystery of being here and now (*in via*). Thus, it is possible to work towards it already in this world.¹⁷ Neither is God in Godself the exclusive target of this symbolic vision.¹⁸ The vision targets God in creatures, (ethical) values, human relationships, humor, art, etc. thereby opening up an infinite field

Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das mittelalterliche Leben, in: AERTSEN, Jan A./PICKAVÉ, Martin (eds): *Ende und Vollendung. Eschatologische Perspektiven im Mittelalter*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 2002, 150–161.

¹¹ Cf. Romans 1:19–20.

¹² This dimension can be captured with the help of such thinkers as Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, Max Scheler, Viktor E. Frankl, Nicolai Hartmann, Alasdair MacIntyre.

¹³ See e.g. the discussion of human fulfilment or *beatitudo* in terms of *visio Dei*.

¹⁴ This reconnects to the ancient philosophical theme of *wisdom* or *philosophical life*. For this dimension see e.g. Pierre Hadot's works.

¹⁵ Its formal aspect can be contrasted with the content of knowledge.

¹⁶ See footnote 11. Note also that the partial vision in this life is neither to be equated with the ultimate eschatological *beatitudo*, nor with some parapsychological state of mind.

¹⁷ Cf. the possibility—and reality—of both rational theology (e.g. Anselm, Aquinas) and philosophical ethics (Abelard) as genuinely philosophical enterprises within (mediaeval) Christianity.

¹⁸ In the mediaeval understanding, God in Godself (*quoad se*) is strictly speaking unknowable to humans. What we can know about God is God as related to us (*quoad nos*).

for investigation. Decortian existential hermeneutics can profit from philosophical analysis, while it gives a more full-fledged form to philosophical modesty. It is certainly sensitive to the historical-cultural context.¹⁹ When compared to intellectual history or a hermeneutical approach, the Decortian framework allows for a clearer focus on the existential dimension of knowledge, that is to say on a connection to real life.²⁰ Admittedly, (historical) relativism still remains an open question, but appears less of a problem—precisely because of this focus on real life.

II

Jos Decorte was a reader of Cusanus as his Dutch translations of *De visione Dei* and *De pace fidei* amply testify.²¹ It goes without saying that a reader—*a fortiori* a translator—is already an interpreter. The fact that Decorte was also a systematic reader of Cusanus can be gathered from his own introduction to the history of medieval philosophy.²² Notably, Cusanus is the last medieval thinker to be discussed in the book.²³ The discussion is directly tied up to the original title, i.e. *truth as a way* (*Waarheid als weg*).²⁴

However, the most important piece of Decortian writings in this respect is his last, posthumous book—only available so far in its original Dutch.²⁵ This is Decorte's main statement in relation to the question as how to understand the Middle Ages. Beyond mediaeval sources its bibliography also reveals the inspiration of Nietzsche, Foucault and notably

¹⁹ Decortian existential hermeneutics is similar to Rorty's edifying philosophy, especially since the latter speaks of the reinterpretation of the familiar as "the inverse of hermeneutics". Cf. RORTY, Richard: *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: University Press 1979. An important difference though is that Rorty seems not to be committed to epistemological realism.

²⁰ Cf. footnote 2. See also Nietzsche in the second part of this paper.

²¹ Cf. VAN CUSA, Nicolaas: *Het zien van God*. Translated by Inigo Bocken and Jos Decorte. Kapellen: Pelckmans 1993 and VAN CUSA, Nicolaas: *Godsdienstvrede*. Translated by Jos Lievens and Jos Decorte. Kapellen: Pelckmans 2000.

²² DECORTE, Jos: *Waarheid als weg. Beknopte geschiedenis van de middeleeuwse wijsbegeerte*. Kapellen: Pelckmans 1992, see also as translated into German by Inigo Bocken: *Eine kurze Geschichte der Mittelalterlichen Philosophie*. Paderborn: Schöningh 2006.

²³ See pages 305–318 in the Dutch edition.

²⁴ Unfortunately, this title has been lost in the German translation—perhaps because the work was published in a series of scholarly handbooks.

²⁵ DECORTE, Jos: *Raak me niet aan. Over middeleeuws en postmiddeleeuws transcendentiedenken*. Kapellen: Pelckmans 2001. Together with my friend, professor Michael Funk Deckard from Lenoir-Rhyne University in North Carolina, US and Hans Geybels from Belgium we have started translating this text into English—a project that might take years because of our other duties (academic and elsewhere). Its working title is *Touch Me Not. On Medieval and Postmedieval Transcendental Thinking*.

Cusanus.²⁶ Indeed, Decorte's main questions can be phrased with the help of these three thinkers. The Nietzschean version would be: What is the importance of (mediaeval) knowledge for life? The Foucaultian: What is the basic mediaeval episteme? How does it work? Finally, the Cusanian: What is (mediaeval) *sapientia*? How is it possible to attain the *visio Dei*? This last formulation bears out well the central intention of the entire study: the book reads as an attempt to think transcendence in a non-reductive, but still rational way.²⁷

In order to illustrate the intellectual kinship between Cusanus and Decorte I shall briefly consider two short passages from their respective oeuvre. As both of these texts concentrate on *humility* as an intellectual virtue they clearly reveal a fundamental common concern.

A certain poor layman came upon a very wealthy orator in the Roman Forum. Smiling good-naturedly, the layman addressed him as follows: "I am amazed at your pride, because although in perusing countless books you tire yourself with continual reading, you have not yet been brought to a state of humility. Assuredly, this [lack of humility results] from the fact that the knowledge that pertains to this world—a knowledge in which you deem yourself to excel others—is, in the eyes of God, a certain foolishness; and, hence, it puffs one up. By contrast, true knowledge makes one humble. I could wish that you would devote yourself to true knowledge, since therein is a treasure of joy."²⁸

By using the figures of the orator (*orator*) and the laymen (*idiota*) bookish learning (*continua lectio, innumerabiles libros lectitando*) is contrasted here with a different kind of knowing. In a traditional, Pauline vein Cusanus regards the knowledge of this world as foolishness and criticizes it, because it does not lead to humility.²⁹ True knowledge (*vera scientia*), on the other hand, is connected both with humility (*humilitas*) and joy (*laetitia*).³⁰ For Cusanus, true thinking, that is to say the genuine exercise of our

²⁶ The works listed there from these three thinkers are respectively Friedrich Nietzsche's *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*, Michel Foucault's *Les mots et les choses* and Nicolaus de Cusa's *Idiota de sapientia et de mente*.

²⁷ See the title of the book and its explanation in the preface.

²⁸ DE CUSA, Nicolaus: *Idiota de sapientia*, Book I, 1:3–10, see HOPKINS, Jasper (transl.): *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge*. Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press 1996, 497. For the Latin text of the Heidelberg edition see <http://www.cusanus-portal.de/> (28.04.2017): "Convenit pauper quidam idiota ditissimum oratorem in foro Romano, quem facete subridens sic allocutus est: Miror de fastu tuo, quod, cum continua lectione defatigeris innumerabiles libros lectitando, nondum ad humilitatem ductus sis; hoc certe ex eo, quia 'scientia' 'huius mundi', in qua te ceteros praecellere putas, 'stultitia' quaedam 'est apud deum' et hinc 'inflat'. Vera autem scientia humiliat. Optarem, ut ad illam te conferres, quoniam ibi est thesaurus laetitiae."

²⁹ Cf. 1 Cor 3:19 and 8:1.

³⁰ Treasure—actually of joy (*thesaurus laetitia*) —here might be a reference to the Gospels, cf. Matthew 6:19–21.

human intellectual capacities should clearly lead us to the *visio Dei*.³¹ Cusanus' laymen—and if we take the *Idiota* dialogues as the best introduction to his oeuvre, then indeed Cusanus himself—promises us an alternative to the eloquent, possibly carrier-oriented, financially perhaps even effective, but ultimately dry and joyless knowledge of the orator. As the reader will soon learn, this is far from being an anti-intellectual stance, but it really concerns both the way one's inquiry is conducted and the results one can achieve. I maintain that the Decortian interpretative framework in terms of its finalistic, symbolic and practical-existential concerns can be understood as a systematization of this fundamentally Cusanian concern.

For the second text I have chosen a short quotation from the very last talk given by Jos Decorte at the Hooger Instituut voor Wijsbegeerte of the Catholic University of Leuven (KUL), Belgium.³² The same passage recurs on the closing page of Decorte's posthumous study on mediaeval knowing.³³ These words read as a phenomenological, almost poetic expression of the existential and symbolic concern—so central to (mediaeval) knowing both in Decorte's and Cusanus' eyes. They are an invitation to think transcendence in a non-reductive and humble way, that is to say by avoiding both the extremes of intellectual pride (*superbia*) and vanity (*vanitas*). They are about thinking transcendence as truly transcendent. Decorte, in effect, is (re)introducing here a lost form of intellectual virtue—that of humility. This philosophical humility can lead us to a new beginning: we can start to reflect philosophically on the meaning of this very humility.³⁴

"In this sort of experience man looks intently towards the horizon to make out roughly the outlines of the House—being aware that this can never be wholly done, in truth, it may never be accomplished fully. While being aware of his finality, he certainly avoids the foolishness of pride and the nonsense of vanity and finds thus true wisdom: that of humility."³⁵

³¹ See BAKOS, Gergely T.: *On Faith*, 146–196.

³² DECORTE, Jos: *Middeleeuwse en hedendaagse appreciatie van de liefdesmystiek*, in: *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 63 (2001), 543–568, here 567. The English translation of the Flemish text was made with the kind assistance of Dr. Guy Guldentops from the Institute of Philosophy at the Catholic University of Leuven.

³³ DECORTE, Jos: *Raak me niet aan*, 218.

³⁴ On Cusanus, humility and its closeness to phenomenological thinking see BAKOS, Gergely: *Infinity and New Phenomenology. In Dialogue with László Tengelyi and Nicholas of Cusa*, in: *Sapientiana* 9 (2016) 2, 51–67.

³⁵ The biblical image of the House is the Father's, and refers to the final mysterious goal of human existence. Cf. John 14:2–3.

Abstract

Historical research has confirmed that from its very beginning in Greco-Roman antiquity philosophy has been as much an existential-practical as a speculative enterprise. In the past century, both existentialism and phenomenology can be understood as returning to this dimension of thinking. My paper offers a new, existential way of looking at mediaeval texts with the help of the late Flemish scholar, Jos Decorte (1954–2001). After a survey of different approaches to mediaeval philosophy and a comparison of each with the Decortian one, I shall indicate how Nicholas of Cusa could have inspired this new understanding.