# Actuality in Theology and Philosophy[1]

*Simon Oliver*

*University of Nottingham*

In this essay, I will discuss a tendency in contemporary philosophy to prioritise the possible over the actual. This seems to be a very significant shift from pre-modern philosophy and theology which maintains the priority of actuality over potentiality. The clearest expression of this latter view can be found in Aristotle's Metaphysics:

> Now since we have distinguished the several senses of priority, it is obvious that actuality is prior to potentiality. By potentiality I mean not that which we have defined as "a principle of change which is in something other than the thing changed, or in that same thing qua other," but in general any principle of motion and rest; for nature also is in the same genus as potentiality, because it is a principle of motion, although not in some other thing, but in the thing itself qua itself. To every potentiality of this kind actuality is prior, both in formula and substance; in time it is sometimes prior and sometimes not.[2]

Aristotle further explains the sense in which potentiality might be temporally prior to actuality. He points out that a seed, which is potentially corn, is prior in time to the corn which it will later become. This is to say that something which is numerically identical

[1] This essay is greatly indebted to a number of extremely fruitful conversations with my colleague Dr. Johannes Hoff of the University of Wales, Lampeter. Omissions and errors are entirely my own.

[2] Aristotle (trans. Hugh Tredennick), Metaphysics I-IX (Cambridge. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), IX.8.1049b4-15.

(this one seed becomes this one ear of corn) features potentiality prior to actuality. However, there will always be something formally identical (this ear of corn has the same form as the seed which it generates) which is in act and which is prior to that which is potential. In other words, a seed, which is potentially an ear of corn, is generated by that which is actually an ear of corn. In the sense of 'form', actuality is prior to potentiality.

In his commentary on this portion of Aristotle's Metaphysics, Aquinas makes clear that actuality precedes potentiality conceptually and with respect to knowledge. He points out that potentiality is always defined in terms of actuality, but actuality is not in turn defined by means of something else, but is only made known inductively.[3] For Aquinas, it is the actuality of the divine which establishes the priority of actuality over potency in both being and knowledge.

> Before the world existed it was possible for it to be, not indeed because of the passive potentiality of matter, but because of the active power of God.[4]

Even if our knowledge begins in potency and passes to actuality[5], it is always preceded by the actuality of God's own knowledge. Our motion from potential knowledge to actual

[3] St. Thomas Aquinas (trans. John P. Rowan), Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics (Notre Dame, Indiana: Dumb Ox Books, 1995), IX.7.1846.
[4] St. Thomas Aquinas (trans. Thomas Gilby, OP), Summa Theologiae (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1a.46.1 ad 1. All translations of the Summa Theologiae are taken from that by the English Province of the Order of Preachers, general editor Thomas Gilby, OP.
[5] For example, I potentially know how to speak Portuguese and, by the motion of learning, come actually to know how to speak Portuguese.

knowledge is, for Aquinas, a deepening participation in the eternal actuality of God's self-knowledge.[6]

Modern philosophy tends to reverse this priority. It marks a point of distinction with theology which continues to prioritise the actual. How does philosophy prioritise potentiality? In a recent article, Michael Rea, in the course of discussing the application of analytic philosophical methods within the sphere of Christian theology, describes a critique of conceptual analysis which can be understood in terms of the prioritisation of potentiality.[7] Rea points to the work of Bas van Fraassen. Although van Fraassen's contribution to analytic metaphysics in the form of his 'constructive empiricism' has been very considerable, he has been forceful in his criticism of certain approaches to metaphysical issues. Put very briefly, van Fraassen argues that such metaphysics can result in the creation of 'simulacra' which become the objects of philosophers' discussions. Rea cites a particular example from van Fraassen's work.[8] Imagine posing the question 'Does the world exist?' Philosophers proceed to define the term 'world' with considerable nuance and detail before claiming that the world exists if and only if the world as they have defined it exists. What makes the world of the philosophers a

[6] Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, 1a.84.a5.responsio: 'Secondly, a thing is spoken of as known in another as in a principle of knowledge; for instance, we might say that things seen by sunlight are seen in the sun. In this sense we must say that the human soul knows everything in the divine ideas, and that by participating in them we know everything. For the intellectual light in us is nothing more than a participating likeness of the uncreated light in which the divine ideas are contained.' Aquinas goes on to explain that, besides the intellectual light which is in us, species taken from material things are required for knowledge. He therefore avoids the sense that material singulars are insignificant and that our knowledge is purely and exclusively a knowledge of eternal ideas. Nevertheless, material singulars have being (*esse commune*) by participation in being itself. They are genuine and potent secondary causes of our knowledge. This is explained in Summa Theologiae, 1a.14.a8.ad3. See also Summa Theologiae, 1a.15.

[7] It should be said that Rea does not express the matter in terms of actuality and potentiality. I take it that this portion of his very clear and helpful essay is more particularly concerned with the nature of conceptual analysis in metaphysics.

[8] Bas van Fraassen, The Empirical Stance, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002, cited by Rea, 'Introduction' in Crisp and Rea (eds.), Analytic Theology, p.23.

simulacrum is not the fact that it is postulated, but that 'satisfying a philosopher's analysis of the concept 'world' is something very different from being a world.'[9]

This tendency is reflected in much philosophy of religion. The philosopher identifies an apparently rigorous and clear, almost self-evident, definition of the term 'God' (just read the opening six lines of Richard Swinburne's The Coherence of Theism) and proceeds to demonstrate the existence of this simulacrum, or, to put it another way, this idol.[10] 'God' is postulated and defined in order to examine the possibility of this 'God's' existence. Kierkegaard famously pointed out this approach with reference to the following example which one can relate to debates concerning the existence of God.

> It is generally a difficult matter to want to demonstrate that something exists…The whole process of demonstration continually becomes something entirely different, becomes an expanding concluding development of what I conclude from having presupposed that the object of investigation exists. Therefore, whether I am moving in the world of sensate palpability or in the world of thought, I never reason in conclusion to existence, but I reason in conclusion from existence. For example, I do not demonstrate that a stone exists

[9] Rea, op.cit., p.23.

[10] Van Fraassen's criticism in the realm of metaphysics and the philosophy of science is in some ways paralleled in the work of philosophers of religion as diverse as D.Z. Phillips and Jean-Luc Marion. Phillips, for example, spurred on by the example of Wittgenstein, points out that philosophers of religion ought not to discuss philosophical abstractions ('simulacra'), but rather take account of what the religious actually do and say – of the way religions 'work' and the so-called 'grammar of belief'. See, for example, D. Z. Phillips, Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). This is quite familiar and is often expressed in terms of a critique of the discussion of the so-called 'God of the philosophers' which is, in fact, no one else's God.

> but that something that exists is a stone. The court of law does not demonstrate that a criminal exists but that the accused, who does exist, is a criminal.[11]

According to Kierkegaard, an enquiry into existence does not begin with the possibility of something's existence, but starts from an actually existing thing. Translated into theological method, we might say that enquiry into God does not begin with the creation of a simulacra whose possible existence we proceed to discuss, but rather with the actuality of some kind of encounter, whatever form it might take. The latter method is most obviously, but not unproblematically, exemplified in twentieth century systematic theology by Karl Barth for whom theology begins not with the possibility of knowledge of God, but with the actuality of God's self-disclosure in revelation.

In this essay, I will focus particularly on the apparent prioritisation of the potential (the possibility of God, or the possibility of knowledge of God) in aspects of the philosophical tradition. From where did philosophy's emphasis on 'possibility' emerge? One might think that the stress on possibility is part of a tradition of general incredulity and doubt which focuses not on what we know, but 'whether' or 'how' we know what we know, and under what conditions knowledge is possible. In other words, it could be associated with modern philosophy's very particular concern with epistemology. Yet the doubting and incredulous stance which is characteristic of the priority of the possible over the actual might be reflected in a tradition which has influenced, and indeed characterised, so much Christian theology, namely the apophatic. Does apophaticism, whether in theology

[11] Søren Kierkegaard (Johannes Climacus), ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Philosophical Fragments, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985, p.40.

or philosophy, begin in reticent and sceptical fashion by probing the possibility of knowledge? If not, in what sense is there a priority of the actual in such theology and philosophy? My discussion will begin with Nicholas of Cusa who, while being perhaps the final representative of Neoplatonic apophaticism in theological and philosophical enquiry, is nevertheless often interpreted as a proto-modern sceptic who is concerned first with the possibility of knowledge.[12] I will argue that in Cusa's discussion of wisdom he begins with the actuality of encounter, but does not offer any kind of positivistic theological knowledge which is characteristic of modern notions of God's self-revelation.[13] Rather, the possibility of creation – including human knowing – is an 'actual possibility' in God's eternal nature. Moreover, the measure of our knowledge is not any series of concepts which we devise; it is the simplicity of God's knowledge.

Cusa is no sceptic concerned with the mere possibility of cognition, for he understands that knowledge, while beginning in 'learned ignorance', is always partial but never 'off-the-mark'. The notion that knowledge is merely 'representation' (rather than participation) introduces the sense of doubt and a concern with the possibility of knowledge. I will further locate the priority of the possible over the actual in the rise of theological nominalism characteristic of the work of, amongst others, William of Ockham. Here, in the focus on the possibility of divine deception alongside the notion of possible worlds which are mere reconfigurations of the individuals which compose the

[12] See Jasper Hopkins, 'Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464): First Modern Philosopher' in Peter A. French and Howard K. Wettstein, Renaissance and Early Modern Philosophy (Midwest Studies in Philosophy, vol. XXVI), (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp.13-29.
[13] On the Hegelian background to the notion of 'self-revelation', so Johannes Hoff's very important essay 'The Rise and Fall of the Kantian Paradigm of Modern Theology' in Conor Cunningham and Peter Candler (eds), The Gradeur of Reason (London: SCM, 2010).

world we inhabit, we will see a characteristically modern variant of scepticism which is always concerned with what might be rather than with what is.[14] More particularly, I will suggest that Ockham's nominalism leads to the view that phenomena can be analysed as abstracted from their created context in such a way that 'idealised' phenomena or 'simulacra' – which remain mere possibilities, not actualities as encountered in the world – become the subject matter of philosophy.

What of theology which apparently begins not with possibilities or simulacra, but rather with the actuality of God's self-donation? This aspect of the theological is the focus of an important analysis by Jean-Luc Marion who describes clearly the way in which philosophy, in its phenomenological guise, struggles to think of revelation even as a possibility.[15] Moving to this more recent analysis of possibility and actuality in theology and philosophy, I will suggest that theology reasserts the priority of the actual in all enquiry. Why? Because theology avoids the subject-object dualism by which conditions for possible knowledge are established in relation to knowing subjects. Instead, theology begins with creatures and the actuality of creation as it gives itself to be known in relation to an eternally actual creator.

## Actuality and the Apophatic

The history of scepticism, extending from Pyrrho, Sextus Empiricus and Diogenes Laertius in antiquity to Descartes in early modernity, is thought to have undergone a

[14] The term 'scepticism' has a technical and restricted definition in philosophy. For now, I use it in the broadest sense to refer to a radical incredulity which is concerned with the possibility of knowledge. Later in this essay, the distinction between scepticism and incredulity will become clearer.
[15] For example, see Martin Heidegger (trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson), Being and Time (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), Introduction.II, para 7, p.63.

revival in the Renaissance as the influence of Aristotle diminished.[16] Such scepticism, broadly conceived, is concerned with the very possibility of knowledge. Is Nicholas of Cusa, writing in the first half of the fifteenth century, an early representative of modern philosophy, or does he preserve a more traditional view which is consonant with the theology and philosophy of the high Middle Ages? For Cusa, as with Plato, philosophy understood as the love of wisdom begins in the realisation of what we do not know. However, this is not pure and unadulterated negativity which simply rests in our ignorance. Why? Because the realisation of what we do not know is – paradoxically – itself knowledge. But where can this knowledge of our ignorance come from? It emerges from the priority of the actual disclosure of being over the pure possibility of our knowledge which in turn provokes desire for wisdom.[17] Cusa writes of this intense desire for wisdom in the form of a dialogue between someone with no formal education – the Idiota – and the apparently wise and learned Orator.[18] The Idiota points out that the Orator claims to be wise, but is in fact ignorant of his own ignorance. The two retire to a

[16] See Richard Popkin, The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). For a revised view of scepticism in the Middle Ages, see Henrik Lagerlund (ed.), Rethinking the History of Skepticism: The Missing Medieval Background (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

[17] Much of what I have to say depends on an important distinction to which Sarah Coakley and Bernard McGinn have recently pointed, namely that between apophaticism on the one hand, and the tradition of negative theology, the via negativa, on the other. The Latin via negativa refers, of course, to the negation of our concept of God, and occasionally even to the negation of our negations in the Greek Dionysian tradition. As Coakley points out, the Greek apophasis means 'saying no', this being mirrored in the Latin tradition of the negative way. However, apophasis might also convey a sense of 'revelation', from the verb apophaino, 'to show forth' or 'to display'. So rather than resting in a mere negation of whatever we encounter, the apophatic tradition, beginning with apophaino, begins first with the actuality of a positive disclosure of being. So when I talk of the apophatic, I wish to emphasise not the unmitigated negativity in some strands of the via negativa, but the priority of revelation and disclosure in the apophatic. See Sarah Coakley, 'Introduction – Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopogite', Modern Theology 24(4), 2008, p.539, n.30 citing Bernard McGinn, 'Three Forms of Negativity in Christian Mysticism' in John W. Bowker (ed.), Knowing the Unknowable: Science and the Religions on God and the Universe (London: I. B. Taurus, 2008).

[18] Nicholas of Cusa, De Sapientia in Jasper Hopkins (trans.), Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1996).

barber's shop to discuss the matter, whereupon the Idiota uses a number of characteristically Cusan examples to explain his position.

Wisdom, says the Idiota, proclaims itself in the streets and declares that it dwells in the highest places. So the Idiota looks to the streets, to the market place, and points out that one can see money being counted, goods being weighed and oil being measured out. By the reasoning of counting, weighing and measuring, human beings discriminate by means of a single unit. One is the beginning of number (all subsequent numbers are multiples of one), the smallest weight is the beginning of weighing, and the smallest measure the beginning of measuring. For the sake of argument, the Idiota takes the smallest weight to be the ounce, the smallest measure to be the inch. Every number is constructed by means of the one, every weight by means of the ounce, and every measure by means of the inch. But by what, asks the Idiota, do we attain to the one, to the ounce or the inch? Oness is not attained to by number, because number is subsequent to the one. Likewise, the ounce is not attained to by means of weight, nor the inch by means of measurement.

What is Cusa's point here? It is that the composite cannot be the measure of the simple, or that what is subsequent to an origin cannot be the measure of its origin. Take the example of creation in Christian theology: the creative act cannot itself be a natural process, for natural processes are subsequent to creation and cannot 'measure' creation. This is the basis for the Judaic, Christian and Islamic conviction that God creates ex nihilo. As Cusa writes,

> …the Beginning of all things is that by means of which, in which and from which whatever can be originated is originated; and, nevertheless, [that Beginning] cannot be attained unto by any originated thing. It is that by means of which, in which and from which everything that can be understood is understood; and nevertheless, it cannot be attained unto by the intellect.[19]

To put this in the parlance of Platonic metaphysics, Cusa is expressing the conviction that, for example, the Form of horse is not itself a horse.[20] Moreoever, particular horses do not 'measure' the Form 'horse', but rather the reverse. Thus that which is the origin of measure is not itself a measure, that which is the origin of weight is not itself a weight, and that which is the origin of being is not itself a being.

Continuing his discussion of the wisdom which philosophy seeks, Cusa defines 'supreme wisdom' in the following perplexing way: 'that you know…how it is that the Unattainable is attained to unattainably.'[21] This is a characteristically Cusan paradox. What does this mean? Cusa is pointing out that the means by which we attain knowledge, namely by comparison and measuring one thing in terms of another through a proportion, cannot be the means by which we attain that which is simple and the measure of all things. In other words, whatever means we use to attain knowledge of creation or the natural world, we cannot use those same means to attain knowledge of the origin of creation or the natural world. Why not? Because this would be to treat that origin as part

[19] Nicholas of Cusa, De Sapientia I.8.
[20] This interpretation of Plato's metaphysics of the Forms refers particularly to its later expression in the Theaetetus.
[21] Nicholas of Cusa, De Sapientia, I.7.

of the order it is supposed to measure – in other words, as an object amongst other objects. In fact, in De Docta Ignorantia ('On Learned Ignorance'), Cusa goes further and states that wisdom is the realisation that God is beyond all distinction – potency and act, motion and rest, lesser or greater, light and dark, maximum and minimum – and in God all opposites coincide.[22] Why? Because the absolute simplicity of God measures these spectra. It is not that God lies at the extreme end of, say, the act-potency or rest-motion spectrum. This would be to conceive God through a kind of proportionality, and such speech about God would in fact be speech about a creature. The crucial point for Cusa is that there cannot be a proportion between finite and infinite. The finite world is not simply a smaller version of the infinite. Rather, the infinite comprehends within itself all finitude because it is not itself just a very big finite thing.

The notion that opposites coincide in the simplicity of God is most clearly expounded in Cusa's De Docta Ignorantia, God is the 'absolute maximum', exceeding all opposition, even the law of non-contradiction.[23] More particularly, God is beyond the Aristotelian distinction of act and potency, for God is what Cusa calls the possest, the coincidence of posse and est, of possibility and actuality, although he is deploying these terms in a quite unAristotelian way.[24] God is all that it is possible for God to be, and God contains within himself all real possibilities. No creature has realised all that it is possible for it to be, yet somewhat paradoxically that possibility is actual; that actual possibility – the possest – is God.

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[22] See Nicholas of Cusa, trans. H. Lawrence Bond, Selected Spiritual Writings (New York: Paulist Press, 1997). All translations from De Docta Ignorantia are from this summary edition of Cusa's works.
[23] Nicholas of Cusa, De Docta Ignorantia, I.4.
[24] Nicholas of Cusa, De Possest available in Jasper Hopkins, A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa (3rd ed.) (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1986),

At first glance, it appears that Cusa is proposing something rather different to the Aristotelian notion of God as actus purus. However, it would be better to understand Cusa as refining in a very subtle way the Thomist priority of actuality over potentiality. For Cusa, one cannot, strictly speaking, speak of 'priority' in God because this implies composition. He states,

> Therefore, absolute possibility, about which we are speaking and through which those things that actually exist are able actually to exist, does not precede actuality. Nor does it succeed actuality; for how would actuality be able to exist if possibility did not exist? Therefore, absolute possibility, actuality, and the union of the two are co-eternal.[25]

He goes on to explain that in creation, the actual and possible become distinct. This means that creatures feature potentiality, but that potentiality is defined with reference to a prior actuality that lies elsewhere, in another. In the end, all potentiality in creation is only real – that is, an 'actual potential' – in relation to God himself. By contrast, Cusa maintains this division does not pertain to God. Within God's eternity is contained all that it is possible for God to be, yet that possibility is at once actual. God eternally actualises himself.

> I am speaking in absolute and very general terms - as if I were saying: "Since possibility and actuality are identical in God, God is – actually – everything of

[25] Nicholas of Cusa, De Possest, 6.

> which 'is able to be' can be predicated truly." For there can be nothing that God [can be but] is not actually. However, the case of the sun is different. For although the sun is actually what it is, it not what it is able to be. For [the sun] is able to exist otherwise than it actually is.[26]

Once again, Cusa is claiming that God does not simply lie at the far end of a series of metaphysical spectra such as those between potency and act or motion and rest. This would be to conceive of God in terms which are too univocal with creatures. God is the 'coincidence' of these opposites, for he comprehends or 'enfolds' the very spectra themselves.[27] God is the trinity of absolute possibility, absolute actuality and the union of the two.

This has implications not only for our knowledge of God, but for the nature of our knowledge in general. For Cusa, we attain knowledge by the comparison of one thing with another. Moreover, human perception is always from a certain perspective, and only God views each object from an infinite number of perspectives at once and therefore knows each thing as it is in itself. In De Docta Ignorantia, Cusa puts it this way:

> A finite intellect…cannot precisely attain the truth of things by means of a likeness. For truth is neither more nor less but indivisible. Nothing not

[26] Nicholas of Cusa, De Possest, 8.
[27] Nicholas of Cusa, De Possest, 8: 'Therefore, since the facts of the matter are such that God is Absolute Possibility, is Actuality, and is the Union of the two (and so, He is actually every possible being): clearly, He is all things, in the sense of enfolding all things. For everything that in any way either exists or can exist in enfolded in this Beginning. And whatever either has been created or will be created in unfolded from Him, in whom it is enfolded.' Cusa's position is on the same trajectory as Aquinas. See Summa Theologiae, 1a.14.a9.

> itself true is capable of precisely measuring what is true…So the intellect, which is not truth, never comprehends truth so precisely but that it could always be comprehended with infinitely more precision…Therefore, the quiddity of things, which is the truth of beings, is unattainable in its purity, and although it is pursued by all philosophers, none has found it as it is. The more profoundly learned we are in this ignorance, the more closely we draw near to truth itself.[28]

This has led some commentators to see in Cusa a proto-modern scepticism, particularly concerning empirical knowledge. Is this the case? What we certainly do not find in Cusa is anything like the division between the phenomenal and the noumenal, or Locke's primary and secondary qualities. Our knowledge or perception of things is merely a partial knowledge which can be infinitely perfected. Most importantly, however, is Cusa's claim that our knowledge is not the measure of things, but is rather itself measured. First, the intellect is measured by what it knows, but ultimately it is measured by God's simple and eternal knowledge. This means that potential human knowledge is measured by a prior actuality: the actuality of that which is known, whose potential is, in turn, a sharing in the actuality of God's knowledge, which is God's eternal self. This is in contrast to much modern philosophy which begins, as in Kant, with the a priori 'conditions for the possibility of knowledge'. So under this modern philosophical scheme what measures human knowledge is not some prior actuality which gives itself to be known and which has its ultimate origin in the eternally simple source of being, but rather the pre-established conditions under which knowledge is deemed possible. In short,

[28] Nicholas of Cusa, De Docta Ignorantia, I.3; See also De Sapientia II.38.

human knowledge becomes its own measure, whereupon it becomes idolatrous; what we see in our knowledge is merely ourselves.

Cusa's notion that our knowledge is partial and, while not 'off the mark', always subject to ever-greater perfecting, is indicative of a more general Neoplatonic tradition of which he is one of the last representatives. That tradition used the metaphor of illumination in speaking of human knowledge. In Plato's dialogue The Republic, Socrates famously describes knowledge and the nature of the Good metaphorically with reference to the illumination provided by the sun.[29] He points out that the sun provides light, warmth and therefore sustenance to the creatures and objects around us, and also illuminates the world to make things visible and therefore knowable. This becomes a metaphor for the illumination provided by the Good within the visible realm which we inhabit. For Plato, the Good makes things knowable, and it is by participation in the Good that things come to be and are sustained. Crucially, we can participate in the Good with more or less intensity. Moreover, fact and value are not in any way dissociated: something is knowable – and something is – to the extent that it is good. My intellect can be more or less intensely illuminated by the Good, and the visible realm which I attempt to know will be more or less knowable according to the intensity of its share in the Good. So knowledge can be more or less bright.

This tradition had a broad influence on Christian belief and practice leading up to the high Middle Ages. To believe in God was not to believe in just another object within our metaphorical visual field, but to believe that our knowledge is made possible by

[29] Plato, Republic VI.508a ff.

something wholly other to which creation points – that there is something actual which precedes our knowledge's possibility. Yet this belief and knowledge is not thought to be untrustworthy and therefore a source of scepticism, bur rather partial and susceptible to ever greater illumination and clarity of vision. As Cusa put it, our knowledge is capable of ever greater precision. Most importantly, true wisdom is thought to begin in realising the dimness of one's own perceptions of that which gives itself to be known.

## Representation, Deceit and Ideal Knowledge

How is this tradition of knowledge as illumination superseded in modernity in such a way that potentiality comes to have priority over actuality? I will consider two important shifts in late mediaeval thought: the understanding of knowledge as representation, and theological nominalism.

The debate about the nature of the univocity of being in the thought of John Duns Scotus has been particularly contentious of late. What is less contentious is the claim that Scotus anticipates a particularly modern form of epistemology when he teaches that knowledge is a form of representation rather than illumination.[30] What does this mean? Imagine I am gazing at a tree. According to view that knowledge is merely representation, my knowledge of a tree is rather akin to my mind taking a snapshot of the tree as if my mind

[30] The most scholarly treatment to date of this aspect of Scotus's thought is Olivier Boulnois, Être et Représentation: Une genealogie de la métaphysique moderne à l'époque de Duns Scot (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999). Of course, the best known recent critique of the representational theory of knowledge is Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

were a camera.[31] Whereas for an earlier tradition the form of the tree would come to reside in the intellect in such a way that there is an intimate connection between knower and known, for this later tradition what I know is not the tree itself, but only a representation of the tree. This is significant for two reasons. First, representations can be the cause of mistrust. In other words, my representational knowledge of the tree can be called into doubt because it is only a representation – a picture or snapshot, if you like. Understood in this way, the knowledge which comes from our senses can be the object of suspicion and doubt, and hence knowledge as representation is often regarded as the beginnings of a peculiarly modern form of scepticism. A corollary of this provides the second reason why knowledge as representation in Scotus is important. Because knowledge is now somewhat problematic, the focus for philosophy shifts from what we know (in which ontology (the what) and epistemology (the knowledge) are intertwined) to how we know what we know. This therefore marks the invention of an autonomous and particular variant of philosophy which has become of almost exclusive concern in the modern period, namely epistemology – the study of 'how' or 'whether' we know what we know. With knowledge understood as representation, created beings are known without reference to a transcendent and simply are as they appear to be to us in our representation of them. We do not know things in themselves (however falteringly or partially), but only representations of those things. In some forms of modern philosophy, the central project therefore becomes exclusively epistemological: the assuaging of scepticism and radical doubt by the attainment of certain or foundational knowledge.

[31] In his discussion of representational knowledge, Rorty uses a different metaphor: human knowledge is akin to the reflection of images in a mirror. Philosophy's task is the polishing of the mirror in the hope that representations become clearer with respect to their objects.

Further developments in theology and philosophy contribute to the history of sceptical enquiry and the concomitant prioritisation of the possible over the actual. The first concerns the possibility of divine deception which leads beyond mere incredulity. This is occasioned in part by William of Ockham's much-debated view of intuitive and abstractive cognition.[32] By 'intuitive cognition', Ockham means the immediate perception of an individual to which we are present by means of one or more of our senses. Importantly, this includes a judgement concerning whether or not the thing exists. Unlike earlier theories, an act of 'abstractive cognition' (which, broadly speaking at the risk of over-simplification, concerns imagination or recollection) does not necessarily concern the formulation of universal concepts from particulars. Instead, such cognition refers to abstraction from existence and non-existence. An act of abstractive cognition (such as a memory) does not contain within itself anything sufficient to cause me to assent to a proposition (for example that my memory of my friend wearing a black coat last night is true).[33] For the moment, we are particularly concerned with Ockham's view that we can have intuitive cognition of non-existent individuals. This is not to say that we have an intuitive cognition that something exists when in fact it does not exist. Rather, Ockham allows the possibility that one can have an intuitive cognition of something that does not exist, and part of that cognition is the (correct) understanding that what one

[32] See, for example, William of Ockham (trans. Alfred J. Freddoso and Francis E. Kelley), Quodlibetal Questions (Quodlibeta Septem) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), V.5. This aspect of Ockham's epistemology is discussed in Etienne Gilson, The Unity of Philosophical Experience (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), ch.3 and Claude Panaccio and David Piché, 'Ockham's Reliabilism and the Intuition of Non-Existents' in Henrik Lagerlund (ed.), Rethinking the History of Skepticism: The Missing Medieval Background (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 97-118.

[33] A more detailed and nuanced description of Ockham's distinction between intuitive and abstractive cognition can be found in Elizabeth Karger, 'Ockham's Misunderstood Theory of Intuitive and Abstractive Cognition' in Paul Vincent Spade (ed.), The Cambridge Companion to Ockham (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 204-226. On the debate concerning the interpretation of Ockham on these issues, see also Elizabeth Karger, 'Ockham and Wodeham on divine deception as a skeptical hypothesis', Vivarium 42, 2004, 225-236 and Eleonore Stump, 'The Mechanisms of Cognition' in Spade, op.cit., 168-203.

intuits does not exist. This is not brought about naturally, as in the case of an intuitive cognition that something does exist (for example, the desk at which I am working), but rather by divine intervention.

> In this question I propose two theses. The first is that by God's power there can be an intuitive cognition of an object that does not exist. I prove this, first, through the article of faith, 'I believe in God the Father Almighty.'[34]

As Panaccio and Piché suggest, the reasons why Ockham held this very unusual thesis are complex, but particularly concerned with the possibility of intuitive cognition of non-existents suggested because of an emphasis on divine omnipotence and focus on the sovereign freedom of the divine will as distinct from the divine nature.[35] However, one important consequence of Ockham's thesis concerning the intuition of non-existents is that it affords a particular epistemological status to possibilities. In other words, I know non-existing things – which must nevertheless be potential – in the same way as I know existing things: by the certitude of intuitive cognition.

The notion that we can have intuitive cognition of non-existents is, of course, not indicative of scepticism. However, when the possibility of divine 'intervention' in human cognition is entertained in this way, it does raises a possibility which was to appear with particular force in scepticism, particularly leading to the philosophy of Descartes: the

[34] Ockham, Quodlibetal Questions, VI.6. See also Ordinatio I.prologue.
[35] Panaccio and Piché, op.cit. (n.31)/

view that God could deceive us.[36] To understand why this is particularly important in the history of scepticism, it is necessary to distinguish scepticism from mere questioning or incredulity. Take the case of a stick which is dipped into a bucket of water. It appears as if the stick bends or becomes crooked. Referring only to my sight, this is what I would believe is the case, although I can doubt very much that this is the case, partly because I can put my hand in the water and feel that the stick is still straight. However, with reference to something else in my 'cognitive world', namely an accumulated knowledge of optics and the effect of water on perception, I can prove that my initial perception that the stick is crooked requires amendment or nuance. The point about this process of reason is that I can use one aspect of my perception and understanding (optics and water) to correct another aspect of my perception and understanding (the crooked appearance of the stick). This is how the usual process of inquiry and general incredulity operates in any intellectual enterprise. What makes divine deception different is that it calls into question every aspect of my perception and understanding in such a way that I cannot use one part to correct or amend another. The result of this emphasis on divine deception – the idea that God could annihilate the world while preserving my perception of that world – is that the reality of the world is indistinguishable from the possibility that it has been annihilated while my perception of that world is preserved. In principle, therefore, there is no way to end one's incredulity in the case of such scepticism; possibility reigns.

[36] Ockham, Quodlibetal Questions, V.5: 'Nonetheless, God can cause an act of believing through which I believe a thing to be present that is [in fact] absent. And I claim that this belief-cognition will be abstractive, not intuitive. And through such an act of faith a thing can appear to be present when it is absent.'

However, Ockham's nominalism and his so-called 'principle of annihilation', articulated in the context of the discussion of the intuition of non-existents, marks, as Amos Funkenstein has shown, the radical shift from the theological cosmology of Aquinas and that which will be articulated by Cusa a century or so after Ockham.[37]

> Further, every absolute thing that is distinct in place and subject from every other absolute thing can by God's power exist when that other absolute thing is destroyed.[38]

For Aquinas and Cusa, any existing singular is part of an intricate and delicate system of reference which, crucially, forms a whole. This had been the conviction expressed in Platonic and Neoplatonic cosmologies extending back to the Timaeus: the cosmos forms a universe. One could only understand a part with reference to the other parts and, ultimately, the whole. For Ockham, by contrast, the parts of the universe were 'self-standing' and comprehensible in their singularity. One part could be annihilated without consequence for the remainder. As Funkenstein remarks, while, for Aquinas, God could create other worlds (and thus they are 'possible'), each of those worlds forms a coherent whole such that one part belongs intrinsically within that whole. For Ockham, every individual thing is 'immediate to God' in such a way that the individuals composing the world we inhabit could be reconfigured in an infinity of possible ways to form possible worlds. Unlike earlier thinkers, Ockham could therefore conceive of possible worlds

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[37] Amos Funkenstein, Theology and the Scientific Imagination (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986), especially p.135.
[38] Ockham, Quodlibetal Questions, VI.6; William of Ockham (ed. P. Boehner), Philosophical Writings (Edinburgh: Hacket Publishing, 1957), p.26.

which are mere re-configurations of the world we inhabit. For Aquinas, this makes little sense. The individuals of this world are constituted in their identity by their very place in the whole. Take them out of that context and they are no longer what they were.

The consequence of Ockham's nominalism and principle of annihilation which concerns us more immediately is the notion of 'idealised experiments'. If individuals are immediate to God and therefore intelligible in their individuality divorced from any wider context within creation, this makes it thinkable to 'annihilate' all but those phenomena one wishes to consider. One could therefore conceive of a particular phenomena in nature say the motion of a body removed from any particular context and consider only that motion. Thus one can imagine an 'idealised' or 'pristine' motion which is stripped of any complexity or context. A clear example of such an 'ideal' is Isaac Newton's reference to a single body in motion through a vacuum.[39] All other aspects of creation – the context, for example, of motion – have been removed or 'annihilated'. Newton uses such an 'idealised moving body' to formulate his three laws of motion. No such motion has ever pertained for all 'actual' motion that we observe occurs within an intricate context which furnishes it with meaning. For Newton, natural philosophy as represented in the idealised thought experiments of the Principia Mathematica is not concerned with the world as it is actually received, but an idealised 'possible world' represented by phenomena divorced from their context. In such circumstances, natural philosophy's starting point is not the world as it is encountered, in all its complexity, but an approximation which is but a

[39] For a more detailed discussion of Newton's understanding of motion in relation to idealised experiment, see Simon Oliver, Philosophy, God and Motion (London: Routledge, 2005), ch.6.

possibility or ‘simulacrum’. It is a ‘possibility’, a construct arrived at through annihilation.

In returning to Cusa, it is possible to see the further importance of this development in relation to the priority of the possible over the actual. For Cusa, it is the eternal simplicity of divine self-knowledge which ‘measures’ our knowledge and ensures its veracity. This is to say that it is the actual which measures the possible. In a natural philosophy which is concerned with idealisations, it is the reverse: the possible measures the actual. For Newton, for example, it was the possible (idealised) motion of a single body in a vacuum which is used as the measure of all actual motions. This in turn can be translated into the method of philosophy of religion which begins with simulacra. An ‘idealised’ possible being, which we name ‘God’, is used to measure and interpret the actual world. Either the simulacrum we call ‘God’ is shown to be a bad measure, in which case it is disposed of in favour of another possibility (certain forms of atheism or scientism), or we alter and nuance the simulacrum so that the world becomes measurable by its standards (fundamentalism). Either way, the possible measures the actual.

## Phenomenology and the Possibility of Revelation

Has philosophy attempted to progress from its confinement within ideal possibilities which form approximations to the actuality of the world? Twentieth century philosophy in the form of phenomenology represents, in part, a wholesale rejection of representational knowledge and an attempt to return to ‘the things themselves’. There is a sense in which this form of philosophy strives to begin with the actuality of the givenness

of the world to human consciousness. In a recent essay, Jean-Luc Marion asks whether such an approach to philosophy can offer more to theology, given that the former tends to prioritise conjecture and possibility while the latter concerns actuality.[40] He discusses what he takes to be a core aspect of religion and theology, namely revelation, and asks whether philosophy can at least admit the possibility of revelation. On the face of it, there is a clear difficulty: revelation entails an authority transcending experience manifesting itself experientially. Under the principle of sufficient reason (Kant's 'religion within the limits of mere reason'), Marion concludes that revelation is rendered impossible.

> The emergence of the principle of reason forces metaphysics to assign each being its concept and its cause, to the point of dismissing any beings irreducible to a conceptualizable cause as illegitimate and hence impossible. It is therefore no fortuitous coincidence that the thinkers of the causa sive ratio also disqualified the possibility of miracles and revelation in general. In this sense, religion remains admissible only by renouncing revelation in the full sense.[41]

This suggests that philosophy of religion will establish the conditions for the possibility of revelation a priori, in advance of revelation's actuality. This neutralises revelation, for it will subject revelation to established conditions of reason in such a way that it becomes no revelation at all. Once again, we are left discussing chimera or idols. If revelation remains, it does so as moral law or as irrational and fanatical, breaking the conditions of its own possibility.

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[40] See Jean-Luc Marion, 'The Possible and Revelation' in idem. (trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner et al), The Visible and the Revealed (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 1-17.
[41] Ibid., p.2.

Marion asks whether the phenomenological method can open the possibility of revelation and thus provide some relationship with theology. However, the Kantian transcendental method which attempts to delineate 'the conditions for the possibility of knowledge' still, for Marion, haunts phenomenology as conceived by Husserl.[42] For Kant, the possibility of knowledge is conditioned by the formal condition of intuition and concepts. This is the lens through which phenomena are received. The world is never received as it actually is, but under the conditions for the possibility of knowledge.[43] Nevertheless, by referring to the sheer 'givenness' of phenomena, the Kantian limits of the possible are extended. Genuinely to return to the things themselves means that our intention (that is, what we intend or surmise in the face of a particular experience which marks the limits of the possible) is subsequent to the fact of being given to consciousness which testifies to the necessity of receiving phenomena as they give themselves, not according to conditions of possibility. So Marion writes,

> By thus lifting the prohibition of sufficient reason, phenomenology liberates possibility and hence open the field possibly even to phenomena marks by impossibility.[44]
>
> What philosophy of religion tends to close, phenomenology of religion could open.[45]

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[42] See Jean-Luc Marion, 'The Saturated Phenomenon' in idem. (trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner et al), The Visible and the Revealed (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 18-65.
[43] See Immanuel Kant (trans. Norman Kemp Smith), Critique of Pure Reason (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.238 (A218/ B265).
[44] Ibid., p.5.
[45] Ibid., p.7.

However, Marion suggests that there are still problems with the phenomenological method. Put very briefly, he is concerned that this approach to philosophy continues to establish an horizon which, while not rendering revelation impossible, will nevertheless subject revelation to 'conditions of possibility.' He cites two in particular: the I and the horizon. The first, the I, concerns the method of reduction. Phenomenology involves a reduction of the every-day lived experience of the world towards the intention of a conscious subject – a transcendental subjectivity. Marion's concern is that whatever is received in revelation remains constituted by this 'I'. In other words, there remains a subject-object relation: the subject constitutes the phenomenological object in such a way that the I forms another condition of possibility for revelation. Yet 'The I has not the slightest idea, notion, or expectation regarding who or what is revealed.'[46] The notion of 'reduction' seems to preclude, or at least radically limit, revelation. Similarly, phenomenology, according to Marion, 'presupposes a horizon for presenting the phenomena it reduces and constructs.'[47] In the case of Heidegger, this horizon is Being under which 'God' is thought.

> But the holy, which alone is the essential sphere of divinity, which in turn alone affords a dimension for the gods and for God, [the sacred] comes to radiate only when being itself beforehand and after extensive preparation has been cleared and is experienced in its truth.[48]

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[46] Ibid., p.9.
[47] Ibid., p.10.
[48] Martin Heidegger (ed. William McNeil, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi), 'Letter on Humanism' in Pathmarks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.258, cited and quoted in Marion, op.cit., p,11. Marion

In other words, God can only be made manifest within a particular space which is measured by Being rather than by God himself.

We are left, therefore, with phenomenology delineating the possibility of revelation in advance of its actuality which, according to Marion, in effect neutralises the possibility of revelation. It renders revelation 'impossible' in such a way that revelation takes on an 'extrinsicist' character: it arrives 'outside' the established conditions of possibility for experience. Under such circumstances, revelation is simply reduced to the bizarre, the weird or the unintelligible.

Marion's answer to this aporia of revelation comes in the form of his concept of the 'saturated phenomenon', of which revelation is the most acute kind.[49] Put briefly, a saturated phenomenon can be distinguished from the everyday experience of an ordinary object in the following way. According to Husserl, intention is always in excess of intuition. In other words, I see the mug on my desk from just one of an infinite number of perspectives as the mug gives itself to be known. My intuition is limited by a single perspective. But what I 'intend' is the mug in its entirety: its countless uses, the infinite circumstances in which it might be viewed, and so on. This is to say that the object is constituted by the transcendental subject, namely by the intention. By contrast, the saturated phenomenon is the reverse; what is given in intuition exceeds intentionality.

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remarks that the transcendental method of Rahner is subject to precisely this horizon of Being with respect to revelation.

[49] See Jean-Luc Marion (trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky), Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 199-247.

The intention which is contributed by the I is overwhelmed by what is given by the phenomenon concerned. For example, in viewing Christ dying on the cross what I intend is the execution of a first century Jewish man; what is given in intuition is the incarnate Son of God dying for the sins of the world. For Marion, the I is constituted by the saturated phenomenon, whereas in ordinary experience the I constitutes the intuited object. To put this is Cusa's terms as discussed above, human knowledge becomes measured by the actuality of God's givenness, rather than being the measure that constitutes possibility.

This very brief discussion of Marion's position suggests the way in which phenomenology's continued prioritisation of the possible and its concomitant inability to think revelation outside of its own conditions of possibility is overcome: philosophy becomes subject to the prior actuality of God's givenness in revelation because, through the saturated phenomenon, revelation establishes its own horizon in constituting the I who receives that revelation. In essence, Marion is talking the language of grace with respect to theology and philosophy. However, there remain two concerns. First, revelation has been defined with reference to a particular kind of phenomena, the saturated, and then again a particular kind of saturated phenomena. This leaves behind a residue of so-called 'ordinary phenomena' which we might think belong to the philosophical enterprise. Meanwhile, theology deals with a delineated subject matter in the form revelation understood as a variety of saturated phenomena. Secondly, and related to this first concern, philosophy in the guise of phenomenology remains within the dualism of subject and object; there is always a suspicion that the I will in some way

continue to mark the horizon of possibility unless the whole of human consciousness, including the reception of ordinary phenomena, is rendered subject to a prior actuality. Can these concerns be assuaged? The division between subject and object is peculiar to modernity and is alien to pre-modern theology. Instead of this dualism, theologians such as Aquinas typically refer to 'creatures' and creation. Moreover, as we saw above with respect to idealised 'possible' phenomena, creation forms a unity in which each part is constituted by its relation to the whole. There is little sense in which an I, as an isolated individual consciousness, can constitute a condition of possibility for the experience of objects in the world. Rather, because the 'I' is more fundamentally a creature embedded by necessity in creation, it is constituted by the prior actuality of that creation. Moreover, the actuality of that creation is more than any person could imagine. On this view, there is a sense in which all pheneomena are, to some degree, saturated. Why? Because what we intuit in creatures, rather than objects, will always exceed our mere intention because the creature, precisely in being created, always already implies the radical otherness of the creator.

Marion's scheme of the saturated phenomenon distinct from ordinary phenomena leaves with it the sense of an 'ordinary nature' that is not graced. There also remains a parallel dualism in the form of subject and object. By reconfiguring this scheme in terms of creation, all phenomena can be described as 'saturated' in Marion's sense in such way that the whole of creation becomes, to some degree, revelatory and in excess of our attempts to grasp it or subject it to a priori conditions of knowledge – to possibilities rather than actualities. This becomes more reminiscent of the Cusan scheme described

above in which we begin with the actuality of creation as it gives itself to us, and as it constitutes us by that gift. That actuality remains in excess of our ability to grasp it, and yet our grasp is not 'off the mark' in a way that would suggest sceptical doubt. This entails, however, beginning the philosophical and theological task with docta ignorantia: learning that the actuality of creation exceeds us infinitely and yet, in its givenness from an eternally actual source, is the starting point of all our enquiry.