

Giuseppe Donnarumma*

The limits of rational knowledge in Theodoric of Freiberg

I limiti della conoscenza razionale in Teodorico di Freiberg

Abstract

Il contributo affronta il problema dei limiti costitutivi del processo conoscitivo in Teodorico di Freiberg, con specifico riferimento alla *cognitio rationalis* e ai caratteri del suo oggetto. In termini generali la conoscenza razionale implica una differenza tra soggetto, attività conoscitiva e oggetto conosciuto, dunque una alterità (quale identità nella differenza) nell'intelletto. Questa si traduce in una composizione noetica intrinseca, interpretabile alla luce della categoria ontologica di accidente. Secondo Teodorico l'oggetto dell'intelletto agente coincide con l'atto della sua intellesione, rimanendo in sé stesso e abbracciando così l'universalità dell'intelligibile in una nozione univoca onnicomprensiva (*ens*). L'utilizzo di principi formali da parte dell'intelletto possibile per conoscere il medesimo essere nel modo della definizione implica, di contro, una dinamica di allontanamento dell'attività razionale dal proprio centro sostanziale (la semplice autoidentità noetica) e l'impossibilità di conoscere la realtà nella sua modalità compiutamente semplice e universale.

Parole-chiave: Teodorico di Freiberg, intelletto agente, intelletto possibile, teoria della conoscenza.

Abstract

This paper deals with the constitutive limits of the knowing process in Theodoric of Freiberg, with specific reference to the *cognitio rationalis* and characteristics of its object. In general terms, rationality involves a difference between subject, knowing activity and known object, i.e., an otherness (as identity in the difference) in the intellect. It results in an intrinsic noetic composition, which can be interpreted by resorting to the ontological category of accident. According to Theodoric's noetics, the object of the agent intellect coincides with the act of its intellection, remaining in itself and thus

* Università degli Studi di Salerno, Dottorato Ricerche e studi sull'Antichità, il Medioevo e l'Umanesimo (RAMUS) – Universität zu Köln, Cotutelle Program, Thomas Institut (Universitätsstr. 22, 50923 Köln, Germany); giuseppedonnarumma1@gmail.com.

embracing the universality of the intelligible sphere in a univocal notion (*ens*). On the contrary, using formal principles to know the same being in the manner of the definition implies the rational activity “moving away” from its substantial core (pure noetic self-identity) and the impossibility of knowing the reality in its fully simple and universal mode.

Keywords: Theodoric of Freiberg, Agent Intellect, Possible Intellect, Theory of Knowledge.

Introduction

Noetics represents the most investigated and discussed topic of Theodoric of Freiberg’s work since the “rediscovery” of the author¹. Catalyzed by the radicality of certain theses on the nature and function of the intellect, studies have repeatedly insisted on the “modern” or, more recently, daringly exploratory character of the Dominican’s thought with respect to much later intuitions (to paraphrase Flasch)². The present contribution concedes a perspective once again familiar to modern sensibility, at least in the title and in the preliminary investigative approach, proposing to identify the (possible) limits of rational knowledge in the writings of the Saxon philosopher. By “rational knowledge”, I mean the procedural and definitional manner of knowing of the *cognitivum rationale*, specific to man *pro statu isto*, which, to Theodoric, corresponds to a condition of *imperfecta similitudo ad Deum*. However, epistemic perfection is in principle also accessible to man by virtue of his own ontological structure according to Theodoric, and achievable in

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- ¹ Krebs famously characterized Theodoric’s theory of intellect as “Zentralbegriff” in the Dominican’s Thought. Cf. E. Krebs, *Meister Dietrich. Sein Leben. Seine Werke. Seine Wissenschaft. Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters*, Münster 1906, p. 100. This approach has been substantially maintained and developed, especially (but not exclusively) by the group of scholars involved in the critical edition of Theodoric’s writings. Cf. e.g., L. Sturlese, *Storia della filosofia tedesca nel medioevo. Il secolo XIII*, (Studi 149), Olschki, Firenze 1996, p. 213; K. Flasch, *Dietrich von Freiberg. Philosophie, Theologie, Naturforschung um 1300*, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 2007, p. 327: «Es war keine willkürliche Entscheidung der Bochumer Forschergruppe, Dietrichs Intellekttheorie in Edition und Interpretation voranzustellen. Was Dietrich über den Intellekt geschrieben hat, gehört zum Charakteristischsten der mittelalterlichen Philosophie und prägt sein Denken insgesamt».
- ² Cf. K. Flasch, *Dietrich von Freiberg*, cit., pp. 138-139. For an overview of the debate on Theodoric’s “modernity” and the related bibliographical references see D. Perler, *Theorien der Intentionalität im Mittelalter*, (zweite Auflage), Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 2004, pp. 165-177.

the *visio beatifica*, the direct and intuitive contemplation of God. It will then be a matter of identifying the elements that make the *cognitivum rationale* a constitutively inferior cognitive modality to the *intellectivum* and the reasons for such an onto-epistemic imperfection. They determine the impossibility – in the theological framework of the *De visione* – of placing the condition of man's complete reunification with God in the possible intellect.

This paper is structured in two parts: in the first section (I) I will dwell on the *Quaestio utrum in Deo sit aliqua vis cognitiva inferior intellectu* in order to generally outline the object and characters of cognitive faculties, with particular reference to the *cognitio rationalis*; in the second section (II) I will mention one of the innovations introduced by Theodoric in the *De visione*, namely the ontology of the *ens conceptionale*³, obtained by applying ontological categories (*essentia*, *accidens*) to the gnoseological sphere. Finally, this will allow us to derive the ontological status of the *intellectus possibilis* and bring back the limits of the possible intellect to the limits of accidentality.

I. The cognitive faculties in the *Quaestio utrum in Deo*

In the *Quaestio utrum in Deo sit aliqua vis cognitiva inferior intellectu*⁴, probably written during the Parisian period of teaching (1296/97)⁵, Theodoric addresses the issue of the presence of faculties inferior to the pure creative intuition in God. It has been rightly pointed out that the formulation of this problem indirectly implies a position on the issue of whether God knows singular things,

³ Cf. A.-S. Robin Fabre, «Introduction», in Dietrich de Freiberg, *Oevres Choiesies, II, La Vision Béatifique*, (Bibliothèque des Textes Philosophiques), Vrin, Paris 2012, pp. 52-54.

⁴ Theodoricus (Teutonicus de Vriberg), *Quaestio utrum in Deo sit aliqua vis cognitiva inferior intellectu*, ed. M.R. Pagnoni-Sturlese, in Theodoricus Teutonicus *Opera Omnia*, III, (Corpus philosophorum Teutonicorum medii aevi, II/3), Meiner, Hamburg 1983, pp. 283-315.

⁵ Cf. M.R. Pagnoni-Sturlese, «La “Quaestio utrum in Deo sit aliqua vis cognitiva inferior intellectu” di Teodorico di Freiberg», in: R. Creytens – P. Künzle (eds.), *Xenia Medii Aevi historiam illustrantia, oblata Thomae Kaeppli O.P.* (Storia e letteratura. Raccolta di studi e testi 141), Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma 1978, pp. 101-139, pp. 101-102; ead., «Einleitung», in Theodoricus, *Quaestio utrum in Deo ...*, cit., pp. 288-289; L. Sturlese, *Dokumente und Forschungen zu Leben und Werk Dietrichs von Freiberg*, (CPTMA, Beiheft 3), Meiner, Hamburg 1984, pp. 56, 60-61.

highly topical in the Parisian debate of those years⁶. However, the problem more directly at the core of the *quaestio* is the status and function of the possible intellect, which the philosopher dwells upon throughout the second part of the text.

In his articulate response, the Dominican master offers first a synthetic general presentation of the *virtutes cognitivae* that is, of the genres or possible modes of knowing and their objects, distinguishing a *genus sensitivum*, *rationale*, and *intellectivum*. Sensitive knowledge (or *cognitio sensitiva*) refers to the perception mediated by the senses (internal or external) of the singular; rational knowledge (*cognitio rationalis*) apprehends the universal constituted by formal parts by means of a definitional process, i.e., in its *ratio*; intuitive knowledge (*cognitio intellectiva*) is an immediate and simple apprehension of the *essentia*, which pre-contains (*praehabet*) all entities and their properties in a more actual and “noble” way. It goes without saying that such a *vis cognitiva* also pre-comprises, in its own specific mode of perfect substantial and superabundant unity (*superexcedenti modo*), all individuals and, consequently, every possible content of the lower cognitive forms. It is in fact their cause, according to the well-known model of “essential causality”, widely applied by Theodoric to the purely intellectual substances⁷. There will thus be no reason to attribute inferior cognitive faculties to God.

The main question seems to have already found its solution, but Theodoric continues the discussion in order to show the need to attribute an *aliqua cognitio inferior* to spiritual substances. The philosopher then dwells once again on the difference between *cognitivum sensitivum* and *rationale*: the apprehension of individuals consisting of parts is entrusted to the form provided by the senses; in contrast, rational knowledge determines the *res* in the universal intelligible form, which is outlined, in general, as the result of an intellectual movement having as its “end” or “term” the particular object⁸. The latter corresponds to the phantasm,

⁶ Cf. M.R. Pagnoni-Sturlese, «La “Quaestio utrum in Deo ...», cit., p. 105.

⁷ Cf. Theodoricus, *Quaestio utrum in Deo*, cit., 1.3 (4), p. 296; B. Mojsisch, «„Causa essentialis“ bei Dietrich von Freiberg und Meister Eckhart», in K. Flasch (ed.), *Von Meister Dietrich zu Meister Eckhart*, (CPTMA, Beiheft 2), Meiner, Hamburg 1984, pp. 106-114.

⁸ Cf. Theodoricus, *Quaestio utrum in Deo ...*, cit., 1.4.2.2 (2), p. 300: «Obiectum autem intellectus non est praesens intellectui nisi opere intelligentis per actum intelligendi, et ideo oportet prius natura determinari actum intelligendi, quo tendit in obiectum determinatum; et sic, quamvis obiectum intellectus determinet actum intelligendi secundum rationem finis et termini, quantum

that is, the singular grasped by the senses and “denuded” of its individual characters by the *cogitativum*⁹: it acts, then, as a *subiectum* or matter¹⁰ of the definitional operation and contracts the pure and simple universality (*simpliciter et pure*) of the intelligible form *in potentia* into the intelligible form of a determined *res*¹¹. This model has relevant consequences for Theodoric’s overall theory of knowledge, since the *ratio diffinitiva* of the *res* (i.e., the definition of the object) is never the result of an apprehension external to the intellect: the latter does not passive-

ad operationem et actum intelligendi talis intellectualis operatio determinat sibi obiectum et obiecti praesentiam». Cf. M.R. Pagnoni-Sturlese, «La “Quaestio utrum in Deo ...», cit., p. 126: «Da una parte, dunque, v’è il fantasma quale “dispositio” per cui il soggetto intelligente è indirizzato a comprendere un determinato oggetto ponendolo come “fine e termine” dell’atto intellettuale [...]».

- ⁹ Cf. Theodoricus, *Quaestio utrum in Deo ...*, cit., 1.4.2.2 (11), p. 302: «Et talis virtus est cogitativa, quae est apprehensiva intentionum simplicium separatarum a suis idolis, quibus obvolvuntur in imaginativa et in sensu»; Id., *De visione beatifica*, ed. B. Mojsisch, in Theodorici Teutonici *Opera Omnia*, I, Meiner, Hamburg 1977, 4.3.2 (9), p. 115: «Sicut igitur sensus et imaginatio tendunt in idem obiectum, quamvis secundum diversum gradum in modo apprehensionis, item imaginativum et cogitativum tendunt in idem, quamvis cogitativum simpliciore modo et intimiore quam imaginativum, quia imaginatio apprehendit rem vestitam suis idolis, cogitativa autem ab huiusmodi idolis rem denudatam, ut dicit Commentator». See also A. de Libera, «D’Averroès en Augustin. Intellect et cognitive selon Dietrich de Freiberg» in J. Biard, D. Calma, R. Imbach (eds.), *Recherches sur Dietrich de Freiberg*, (Studia Artistarum. Études sur la Faculté des arts dans les Universités, 19), Brepols, Belgium 2009, pp. 15-62.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Theodoricus, *Quaestio utrum in Deo ...*, cit., 1.4.2 (1), p. 298: «Secundo patet idem ratione sumpta ex proprietate subiecti formae intelligibilis, qua intellectivum rationale aliquid apprehendit et fit actu cognoscens. Oportet enim talem formam intelligibilem habere aliquod proprium subiectum, in quo fit, cum aliquid actu intelligitur. Omne enim, quod exit de potentia ad actum, exit in actum sub respectu ad aliquod subiectum, quod ipso tali actu informetur tamquam materia per formam»; *ibid.*, 1.4.2.1 (7), p. 299: «Cum igitur communitatem agentis ad determinatum actum intelligendi non determinet nisi determinata dispositio subiecti, et hoc non possit esse aliquod ens seu forma realis naturalis, ut dictum est, necesse talem determinatam dispositionem subiecti esse aliquem conceptum inferioris potentiae cognitivae, inferioris, inquam, et alterius ab intellectu, *qualis est in nobis virtus phantastica cogitativa*, secundum quod impossibile est sine phantasmate intelligere secundum Philosophum» (emphasis added). Cf. also Id., *De cognitione entium separatorum et maxime animarum separatorum*, ed. H. Steffan, in Theodorici Teutonici *Opera omnia*, II, Meiner, Hamburg 1980, pp. 151-260, 53 (1), p. 217: «His quattuor suppositis tamquam infallibiliter veris manifestum est et necessario concluditur, quod in angelis invenitur aliqua vis apprehensiva sive cognitiva inferior intellectu, scilicet aliquod phantasticum, quod in operatione intelligibili habet rationem et modum subiecti respectu speciei intelligibilis, quo phantastico aptatur substantia intelligens, ut actu intelligat».
- ¹¹ Cf. *id.*, *Quaestio utrum in Deo ...*, cit., 1.4.2.2 (3)-(5), pp. 300-301.

ly receive the specific form from the phantasm; instead the intelligible species are produced by the intellect in an autonomous movement¹² that takes place by means of the phantasm¹³ and forms it¹⁴.

In summary, the phantasm is presented as the necessary (and insufficient) condition of the cognitive process in the sense of: (a) its start (it determines the change from potentiality to the act of knowing); (b) subject to be informed. Definitional knowledge is achieved only once the cognitive material obtained by abstraction from the senses is subsumed into a species¹⁵. In other words, the *phantasma* determines the contraction of pure original intellectuality into a determinate species, which is, therefore, applicable to extramental reality. The *determinans/contrahens* referred by Theodoric to the *phantasma*¹⁶ is in fact interpreted in the sense of the determination of: (a) an activity¹⁷ and (b) of the formal concept (meaning) of “substance”¹⁸. The pure and simple intellectuality thereby corre-

¹² Cf. *supra* n. 8.

¹³ Cf. *ibid.*, 1.4.2.2 (3), p. 300: «[...]sive igitur exeat huiusmodi substantia per naturalem cognitionem secundum modum naturae suae de potentia ad actum intelligendi, sive etiam ex habitu prorumpat in actum intelligendi, necessarium est aliquid in vi cognitiva inveniri determinans quamcumque potentialitatem dictam, vim videlicet naturalem sive habitualement ad determinatum actum intelligendi. Hoc autem determinans erit aliquid inferius forma intellectuali in aliqua cognitiva inferiore ab intellectu».

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 1.4.2.2 (12), p. 302: «Quia etiam huiusmodi formarum conceptionalium ordo ad invicem est per se et essentialis, quod patet ex ordinata origine unius earum ex alia, quae non potest aliter se habere, hinc est, quod *ex forma intelligibili et formis phantasticis* iam dictis, quibus mediantibus nobis forma intelligibilis continuatur, fit unum essentialiter *quasi compositum ex materia et forma*» (emphasis added); *ibid.*, 1.4.2 (1), p. 298: «[...]Omne enim, quod exit de potentia ad actum, exit in actum sub respectu ad aliquod subiectum, quod ipso tali actu informetur *tamquam materia per formam*» (emphasis added).

¹⁵ Cf. M.R. Pagnoni-Sturlese, «La “Quaestio utrum in Deo ...», cit., p. 127: «il salto qualitativo che farà intus-legere la cosa mediante la sua ratio diffinitiva non è operato dall’intelletto agente, che come luce sui colori genera *quandam similitudinem in intellectu possibili*, piuttosto è la forma intelligibile, data dall’intelletto agente, che sussume l’oggetto della cogitativa e lo rende presente all’intelletto possibile nella sua ratio universalis».

¹⁶ Theodoricus, *Quaestio utrum in Deo ...*, cit., 1.4.2.2 (8)-(10), pp. 301-302.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.4.2.1 (7), p. 299; 1.4.2.2 (2), p. 300; 1.4.2.2(8), p. 301.

¹⁸ M.R. Pagnoni-Sturlese, «La “Quaestio utrum in Deo ...», cit., p. 122: «l’intelletto agente fornisce la forma intelligibile per mezzo della quale viene sussunto l’oggetto della cogitativa. Ma qual è o cos’è questa forma intelligibile che Teodorico dice essere semplicemente e puramente universale? Rispetto all’intellezione di uomo come animale razionale sarà *il più generale concetto di sostanza*» (emphasis added)). Pagnoni’s acute conclusion can be justified in the light

sponds only improperly (analogically) to an original “content” in the man who makes use of the possible intellect: the admission of any pre-existing content, however universal, would in fact imply a degree of determination in the possible intellect and therefore of actuality, inconsistent with the *ratio* of possible intellect itself¹⁹. An essential identity between the actuality of the known object (i.e., its actual presence in the intellect) and the cognitive activity itself is realized only in the agent intellect, as is clearer from the noetic writings.

The maximum universality of the possible intellect then corresponds to a cognitive contribution that is in fact minimal, because it is empty, that is, without content: it takes on significance only in the process of contraction mediated by the phantasm²⁰. In contrast, in divine intuitive knowledge, a maximum of universality also coincides with a maximum of effectiveness (both epistemic and performative). This is, as already intuited by Pagnoni and Kobusch²¹, a modal difference, i.e., different ways (*rationale, intellectivum*) of knowing the *same* object (the *res*), according to the universality of the *partes rationis* or according to the universality of the *simplex essentia*.

II. «Impossibile est Deum immediate per speciem videri»

Many of the theses enunciated in the *quaestio* find a more extensive formulation in the *De visione beatifica*, the second treatise of a trilogy (*De tribus difficilibus quaestionibus*) probably written after Theodoric’s Parisian teaching

of the Noetic texts, which assert the identity of intellect’s object and the universal notion of *quidditas* (*quidditas non haec vel illa, sed universaliter quaecumque quidditas et ens inquantum ens*). Cf. Theodoricus, *De visione ...*, cit., 1.1.4 (2), p. 28 and *infra* (section II).

¹⁹ Theodoric repeatedly rejects any determination in the possible intellect. Cf. e.g. *ibid.*, 3.2.4.: (9), p. 75; *id.*, *Quaestio utrum in Deo ...*, cit., 1.4.2.1 (1), p. 298.

²⁰ Cf. K. Flasch, *Dietrich von Freiberg*, cit., p. 295: «Während Dietrich sonst die Wirkmacht der möglichen Vernunft hervorhebt, betont er in der *Quaestio* ihre Grenze und bindet sie an die Vorstellungskraft, ohne ihre Eigenheit als Intellekt und ihre Produktivität zu vergessen. Er geht dabei weit. Fast könnte man sagen, bei ihm bleibe die mögliche Vernunft, selbst die der Engel, ohne *phantasma* leer».

²¹ Cf. M.R. Pagnoni-Sturlese, «La “*Quaestio utrum in Deo ...*», cit, p.123-124; T. Kobusch, «Die Modi des Seienden nach Dietrich von Freiberg», in K. Flasch (ed.), *Von Meister Dietrich zu Meister Eckhart*, Hamburg 1984, (CPTMA, Beiheft 2), pp. 46-67, p. 51: «Die verschiedenen Modi des ens conceptionale konstituieren sich, insofern eine Sache in verschiedener Weise erkannt werden kann».

period²². In this text, the philosopher undertakes to specify the epistemological “pre-conditions” that underlie the logical possibility of the *visio Dei*. Following a long philosophical tradition, Theodoric identifies the supreme good for man (*beatitudo*) in an intellectual (intuitive) act, coinciding with the vision of God promised by the Scriptures. A long section of the treatise is then dedicated to deconstructing the theses that attribute to the possible intellect the faculty of “seeing God”; instead according to Theodoric this can only happen through the immediate activity of the agent intellect. Keeping in mind that the vision of God implies, in Theodoric’s view, epistemic fullness also with respect to the *res*²³, we will have to thematise the structural limits that, for the philosopher, preclude the intellect from a complete reunion with God.

In the *De visione*, the philosopher’s synthesis of the Neoplatonic and the Arabic-Peripatetic tradition is more explicit. The operation of the possible intellect described in the third part of the treatise corresponds to that of the *cognitivum rationale* examined in the *quaestio*, which is then reabsorbed into a more rigorously Aristotelian terminology: the possible intellect understands the *res* in its own principles, which are *secundum formam*, that is, the formal parts that constitute its universal definition (such as *animal, rationale*, etc.)²⁴. At this point other positions already encountered and more rigorously differentiated also reappear: before knowing the possible intellect is pure intellectuality and only *possi-*

²² Cf. L. Sturlese, *Storia della filosofia tedesca nel medioevo*, cit., pp. 214-215. However, the dating of the work is controversial: the date originally proposed by Mojsisch is around 1290, whereas Flasch is inclined towards 1296/1297 in his monograph. Cf. K. Flasch, *Dietrich von Freiberg*, cit., p. 38. More recently Sturlese postdated further the *De tribus difficilibus articulis* (1299-1304). Cf. Id., «Dietrich di Freiberg lettore di Eckhart?», *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana* 85 (2006) 437-457, p. 452.

²³ I.e., a knowledge of the *res* in the unitary way in which God knows them. Cf. Theodoricus, *De intellectu et intelligibili*, ed. B. Mojsisch, in *Theodoricus Teutonicus Opera Omnia*, I, cit., 2.41 (2), p. 178: «Et si intelligit alia intelligendo essentiam suam vel intelligendo principium suum, illa intelligit modo essentiae suae vel principii sui, sicut etiam sancti beati videndo Deum per essentiam vident alias res in Deo, in quantum sunt ibi modo divino». Cf. also K.-H. Kandler, *Die intellektuale Anschauung bei Dietrich von Freiberg und Nikolaus von Kues, Kerygma und Dogma* 43 (1997) 2-19; B. Mojsisch, «Sein als Bewußt-Sein. Die Bedeutung des ens conceptionale bei Dietrich von Freiberg», in K. Flasch (ed.), *Von Meister Dietrich zu Meister Eckhart*, cit., pp. 95-105, p. 100.

²⁴ Theodoricus, *De visione* ..., cit., 3.2.9.7 (1)-(3), pp. 97-98.

*bilitas quaedam et in potentia forma vel species intelligibilis*²⁵, while after the production of the species, it is instead identical to the same intelligible species produced²⁶. According to Theodoric, the process is carried out through the union of the agent intellect (*sicut forma*) with the possible intellect. However, the possible intellect obtains its forms from the agent intellect itself²⁷ according to its own receptive mode, that of the formal principles of *genus* and *species*, which is obviously different from the mode in which these formal principles are originally found in the agent.

The constitutive limit of such a way of operating on the part of the possible intellect is actually stated from the very first lines of the treatise, the first part of which is dedicated to the agent intellect. In order to refute the applicability of Augustine's *abditum mentis* to the possible intellect, Theodoric writes:

Quod nullus concederet, cum per suam essentiam sit ens in potentia et fit in actu formaliter per speciem intelligibilem, quam constat non esse substantiam. Id autem, quod est substantia et essentialiter est in potentia, non actuatur essentialiter per formam, quae est accidens²⁸.

The carrying out of activity by means of a form, in this case the intelligible species, is not proper to a substance, but rather to an accident with which the intelligible species itself is identified. The philosopher assigns the status of substantia to the agent intellect alone, whose essence, cognitive operation, and known object are identified in perfect unity: the activity of the agent intellect is, in other words, its own substantiality. The possible intellect, in contrast, needs forms through which it operates, marking an irreducible fissure in its very identity between its own *essentia* (pure original intellectuality), its own activity, and the object comprehended. In Aristotle's words: «si intellectus possibilis se ipsum dicatur aliquando intelligere, intelligit se sicut alia, id est per actum suum et sicut aliud a se»²⁹.

²⁵ Ibid., 3.2.5 (1), p. 75.

²⁶ Ibid., 4.2.1 (8), p. 110.

²⁷ Cf. Ibid., 4.3.1 (2), pp. 111-112; id., *De origine rerum praedicamentarium*, ed. L. Sturlese, in *Theodorici Teutonici Opera Omnia*, III, cit., 5 (26), pp. 187-188; 5 (56), p. 198.

²⁸ Theodoricus, *De visione ...*, cit., 1.1.1.3.3 (2).

²⁹ Cf. ibid., 3.2.9.12 (3), p. 103; Aristoteles, *De anima*, III 4, 430a2-3; B. Mojsisch, *Die Theorie des Intellekts bei Dietrich von Freiberg*, (CPTMA, Beiheft 1), Meiner, Hamburg 1977, p. 77.

The fundamental theorem from which Theodoric's argumentative strategy starts is, as in other works, to be found in a passage from Aristotle's *De caelo et mundo*: «unaquaeque res est propter suam propriam operationem»³⁰. The philosopher reduces the entity to the activity, placing in the latter the condition of the general existence of something. He then proceeds to a differentiation in the type of activity, which also returns the degree of perfection of the *res* and its genre. Simplifying greatly the complex subdivisions in the text, it is possible to distinguish: (1) the activity (*operatio*) of perfect entities (*essentiae* in the proper sense), which is all "internal", i.e., intrinsic to themselves and concerning their whole being according to Theodoric's terminology; and (2) the activity of imperfect entities, carried out by means of something other than their simple essence, i.e., by virtue of parts or dispositions³¹. In the first case the *operatio* takes place *per essentiam*, i.e., the reason of the activity is to be found in the essence itself, as essence and activity are in fact identified³². In the second case, conversely, the principle (*ratio et principium*) that initiates/brings out (*elicit*) the activity of entities is to be found in parts or dispositions external to their essence³³. The direct consequence of this is that the entities that act by essence are simple³⁴, always in act and operating immediately, while the other entities are composite and imply a process of *generatio vel corruptio*³⁵. Since the parts, i.e., the accidents of a substance, are extrinsic to the pure essential form, it follows that their activity also tends/orients itself (*versatur*) towards that which is accidental and which, by informing them, allows them in turn to move³⁶.

The application of these conceptual tools in the epistemological field will make it possible to draw crucial conclusions for the specific characterisation of

³⁰ Theodoricus, *De visione* ..., cit., 2.3 (5), p. 66.

³¹ Cf. *ibidem*.

³² Cf. *ibid.*, 3.2.8.1 (1), p. 82: «Quod autem in hac rationis deductione supponitur, scilicet quod operans per suam essentiam est idem cum sua operatione, quae manet in operante, patet ex eo, videlicet quod nulla alia ratione dicimus et verum est, quod ens sive creatum sive increatum sit idem cum sua operatione manente intra, nisi ex eo, quod id, quo secundum actum immediate elicit seu exserit talem operationem, est ipsa rei essentia. Et secundum hoc tale ens dicitur operari vel agere per essentiam».

³³ Cf. *ibid.*, 3.2.9 (5).

³⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 3.2.8.1 (5), p. 83.

³⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 3.2.9.4 (9)-(10), p. 92; 3.2.9.5 (3)-(4), pp. 93-94.

³⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 3.2.9.5 (4), p. 94.

the possible intellect. In reality, it is not a case of superimposing strictly separate disciplinary fields, as if to recombine a basic methodological subdivision between epistemology and ontology; rather, it is an adequate explanation of the onto-epistemic character of the *ens conceptionale* (or *ens in anima*). In other words, the binomial subject-object of thought possesses its own specific ontological status on par with the *ens naturae* and, indeed, develops proportionally to it from the pure notion of *ens*³⁷. *Essentia* in the proper sense is evidently the agent intellect. It is sufficient to return to the first part of the treatise to verify and understand its characters, on the basis of what has been said in general for the simple essences:

primo semper actu intelligit; secundo, quod tali intellectione se ipsum intelligit per suam essentiam; tertio, quod ipsum idem, cum sit intellectus per essentiam et semper in actu suae intellectionis, est quaedam *similitudo et exemplar totius entis in eo, quod ens, secundum quod totum ens secundum omnem sui ambitum sibi intellectualiter praesens est et omnia actu intelligit; quarto, quod, sicut se ipsum, sic omnia alia intelligit per suam essentiam et eodem modo, quo se ipsum intelligit, et eadem simplici intellectione*³⁸.

The third and fourth points mentioned in this text, which are decisive for defining the epistemic efficacy of the agent-intellect, are in fact a consequence of the first two: precisely because the object of the intellect is identified with pure intellectual activity itself, it follows that this intellect contains within itself, in the mode of thought, all being³⁹. That is, it is the maximally universal notion of *quidditas* in act and, as such, also implies any *quidditas* determined in itself, apprehended – as in the case of St. Benedict⁴⁰ – in a simple way: every being must come within its spectrum.

The possible intellect manifests, in contrast, the character of accidentality. The reason for this is to be found in the regression from pure intellectuality: it makes use of formal principles in order to understand the *res* in the mode of definition⁴¹, i.e., instrumental elements that allow it to carry out its process. These

³⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 3.2.9.6 (2)-(3), pp. 96-97.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.1.1.3.6 (2), p. 22 (emphasis added).

³⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 1.1.4 (2), pp. 28-29.

⁴⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 1.1.4 (5), p. 29: «Quod videtur aliquialiter concordare cum eo, quod legitur de sancto Benedicto, videlicet quod in quadam mentis elevatione vidit totum universum».

⁴¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 3.2.9.7 (3), p. 98.

elements, although produced by the intellect itself, do not represent intellectuality in its authentic form, which is, as we have seen, devoid of parts and processes. On the contrary, the use of formal parts (or the intelligible species) to understand leads to a real distancing of thought from its original self-identity, since it “dresses up” in species, that is, it takes on formal determinations that compromise its initial universality⁴². The result is a composition in the intellect determined by the addition to it of external (i.e., different/other) elements from its most authentic form: in this sense it knows itself as other than itself⁴³. Since the final result (i.e., the determined *species intelligibilis*) is identified with the possible intellect *factus in actu*⁴⁴, it is for all intents and purposes an accident⁴⁵.

Conclusions

The possible intellect at the end of its intellectual operation, as accident, also shares the characteristics of imperfection that mark this ontological status: (a) composition and (b) exteriority/particularity. This implies, on the gnoseological side, the impossibility of knowing the *ens simpliciter* through rational knowledge that operates by definitions, that is God and reality in the fully unitary, simple, and universal mode present in his intellect.

The points discussed so far find an interesting application in the field of cosmology. It has emerged how the possible intellect, participating in pure intellectu-

⁴² Cf. *ibid.*, 3.2.9.8 (5), p. 100.

⁴³ 3.2.9.12 (1)-(3), pp. 103-104.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Ibid.* 4.2.1 (8), p. 108: «Si igitur huic deductioni addatur, quod dicitur Alpharabius, Alexander, Averroes, scilicet quod huiusmodi intellecta seu species intelligibiles in nobis sunt idem, quod intellectus possibilis factus in actu, in quantum videlicet intellectus possibilis est noster, manifestum est, quod intellectus agens in omni intellectione unitur intellectui possibili ut forma. In ipso enim et ex ipso resplendet in mente propria et determinata ratio uniuscuiusque intellecti a nobis, immo sine tali ratione rei impossibile esset aliquid intelligere. Talis etiam ratio est forma rei intellectae, in qua ipsa res intelligitur».

⁴⁵ Cf. B. Mojsisch, *Die Theorie des Intellekts bei Dietrich von Freiberg*, cit., p.73: «Begründet vom intellectus agens als dem causale principium actus intellectus possibilis', so nämlich, daß der actus die vom tätigen Intellekt gesetzte forma intelligibilis (*species intelligibilis*) ist, die das gesamte Wesen des möglichen Intellekts ausmacht, ist der mögliche Intellekt als diese Form nichts anderes als ein gewisses Akzidens oder eine gewisse akzidentelle Disposition an der dieser Disposition vorausgesetzten – weil vom intellectus agens bereits wesentlich begründeten – Substanz der Seele».

ality (from which it is derived) is able to grasp the truth of *res* in the definition⁴⁶. This is, however, the truth in its contracted mode (*sub diverso modo essendi*), i.e., referring to a specific entity and, therefore, less universal than pure essence⁴⁷. In fact, in Theodoric's vision of the cosmos, the individual *res* have a marked *relational connotation*, which binds one to the other in an ordered system which is impossible to disregard: in the Dominican's writings the theme of simplicity, universality, and perfection of the *universitas rerum*, or the totality of the cosmos, recurs several times⁴⁸. On the epistemological side, the result of a hypothetical (and in fact impossible) consideration of natural reality in all its extension and evolution would return the *ens simpliciter*⁴⁹, insofar as it represents the very explication of the divine intellect in the *maneries* of the *ens naturae*⁵⁰. Faced with simple reality, the possible intellect is not, however, forced into a kind of epistemological surrender, but rather into "conjectural knowledge", as Alessandra Beccarisi has pointed out⁵¹.

A final remark concerns rational knowledge considered at the beginning of the cognitive process. It has been argued that a maximum of universality corresponds, for the possible intellect, to a maximum of indeterminacy and a minimum of epistemic significance. According to a dynamic that will become clearer in the *De intellectu*⁵², superior substances, i.e., intellects *per essentiam*, enjoy in

⁴⁶ Cf. Theodoricus, *De intellectu*, cit., 3.18 (3), p. 192: «Aliud est, quod est commune sibi, scilicet ipsi primo, et omnibus illius ordinis, quae nihilominus participant illud commune ex ipso primo, ut est cognitio veri in omnibus intellectibus, in quos non potest cadere aliqua falsitas secundum Augustinum Super Genesim XII c. 50, ubi ostendit, quod intellectualis visio non fallitur et quare, et aliqua talia communia ut ens, vivum et cetera».

⁴⁷ 'Pure' essence and 'contracted' essence are, however, numerically identical. Cf. also *ibid.*, 3.19-20, pp. 192-193.

⁴⁸ Cf. Theodoricus, *De visione*, cit., Prooemium (1-2), p. 13; *Id.*, *De intellectu*, cit., 2.10 (3), p. 143; *ibid.*, 2.20 (2-6), pp. 160-161. Flasch speaks of "Sein als Bezüglich-Sein". Cf. K. Flasch, *Dietrich von Freiberg*, cit., p. 407. According to Theodoric, the very natural end of the individual *res* is to be subordinated to the consummation of the reality of which it is part. Cf. Theodoricus, *De cognitione*, cit., 36 (5), p. 199.

⁴⁹ *Id.*, *De origine*, cit., 5 (33), p. 190.

⁵⁰ *Id.*, *De cognitione*, cit., 25 (1), II,2, p. 188.

⁵¹ Cf. A. Beccarisi, «La scientia divina dei filosofi nel De summo bono di Ulrico di Strasburgo», *Rivista di Storia della Filosofia*, 61 No. 1 (2006) 137-163, pp. 146-147. The topic does not find, however, an in-depth focus in the work of the Saxon philosopher.

⁵² Cf. Theodoricus, *De intellectu*, cit., 2.15 (1), pp. 156-157.

contrast a maximum of universality, to which also corresponds a maximum of actuality, i.e., determination and significance, to the point of containing every entity. However, the simultaneous predication of simplicity and unity poses, to the rational knowledge that wants to confront such a coexistence of predicates (simplicity, universality, plurality of rationes), a challenge once again exceeding its limits and will lead, in the *De cognitione entium separatorum*, to a more marked apophaticism.

Knowledge expressed by definition is ultimately a kind of complex mediation point for man, in the middle between the maximum universality of the acting intellect and the particularity of the individuals experienced through the senses. For Theodoric, it certainly provides definitional certainty regarding the essence of specific entities, but it fails to adequately capture either the cause from which they originate or the totality of which they are essentially part.