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JEAN BODIN ON ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION: A REAPPRAISAL

"Reflect" is the important word.
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1. THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DEBATE

Among Jean Bodin's lesser-known contributions to Renaissance philosophy are his remarks on the *vexata quaestio* of action and contemplation, a classic dilemma of Western thought since the time of Plato and Aristotle. Rekindled in the early Renaissance by humanists such as Petrarch and Leonardo Bruni, the debate continued to occupy philosophers and intellectuals well into the seventeenth century.[1] Bodin first addressed this topic at length in his *Methodus* of 1566 and then returned to it several times throughout his long and productive career: in his *République* of 1576, which he himself translated into Latin in 1586; in his *Colloquium Heptaplomeres*, probably composed in the late 1580s-early 1590s but never printed until 1857; and, finally, in his *Universae naturae theatrum* and *Paradoxon*, his last published works, which appeared just months before his death in June 1596. (A French version of the *Paradoxon*, penned by Bodin himself, was published posthumously in 1598.)

In all of these works, Bodin discussed the question of which form of life is better and worthier, the active or the contemplative. To him – trained in his youth as a Carmelite novice and brought up in the values of this contemplative eremitical order, only to then pursue a very active public career as a barrister in the Paris *parlement*, a royal official, and a close counsellor to the royal family – the dilemma must have presented itself with particular urgency. Bodin's entire life bears witness to a strong determination to reconcile *otium* and *negotium* on both a personal and a theoretical level, but also to an acute awareness of the magnitude of this task. As Bodin himself wrote in the *Paradoxon*, the puzzle of action and contemplation was like a «rock» (*scopulus*) against which legions of experienced philosophers from Aristotle onwards had previously «crashed their ships» (*plerique navim afflixerunt*).[2] As he reviewed the solutions put forward by some of these philosophers in his *Methodus* and *République*, Bodin did not hide his dissatisfaction but he also did not offer a clear solution of his own. His stance

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[*] C. S. Lewis, *Suprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (London: Collins, 2012), p. 194. I am grateful to Jill Kraye and David Lines for helpful comments on previous drafts of this article, and to David also for kindly sharing a draft of his forthcoming entry on action and contemplation for the *Encyclopedia of Renaissance Philosophy* (see below).

[1] For a survey that includes a rich bibliography of primary and secondary sources, see David A. Lines, "Action and Contemplation in Renaissance Philosophy", forthcoming in *Encyclopedia of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Marco Sgarbi (Dordrecht: Springer). See also the classic study by Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Active and Contemplative Life in Renaissance Humanism", in *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, vol. 4 (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1996), pp. 192-213. While it does not mention Bodin, the section on "Kontemplations- und Liebes-Ethik (Ficino, Landino, Ficino-Schule)" in Thomas Leinkauf, *Grundriss Philosophie des Humanismus und der Renaissance (1350-1600),* vol. 1 (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2017), pp. 725-737, provides some essential background for the matters discussed in this article.

[2] Jean Bodin, *Paradoxon*, in *Paradosso della virtù*, ed. Andrea Suggi (Milan: Aragno, 2009), p. 62. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. For the sake of space I shall generally quote from the Latin version alone (which is more concise and also usually more technical), except in those few instances where the Latin differs significantly from the French, in which case I shall provide both versions. I defer a systematic comparison of the two texts to an in-progress study of philosophical self-translations in Renaissance France.

on the question remains indeed so elusive that modern interpreters have come to opposite conclusions. Of the two scholars who have examined the issue in more depth, one, Margherita Isnardi Parente, saw a clear shift in Bodin's ideas on the matter and argued that his ideal became increasingly contemplative over the years, as a result of his growing skepticism towards active political life during the most dramatic phases of the Wars of Religion.[3] Paul L. Rose, on the other hand, firmly rejected the idea of a disengaged mature Bodin.[4] He not only suggested that Bodin retained a strong interest in active politics until the end; he also argued that Bodin never changed his mind on the question of action and contemplation, fundamentally remaining faithful to his early allegiance to Varro's "mixed" ideal of a life in which action and contemplation each have a role to play.[5]

What we have here is a radical alternative between a discontinuist assessment of Bodin's intellectual evolution (Isnardi Parente) and one that stresses overall continuity over change (Rose), at least for what concerns Bodin's stance on the specific issue of action and contemplation.[6] It is true that part of the disagreement might come from the different sources on which Rose and Isnardi Parente chose to base their respective analyses. While Isnardi Parente relied solely on the *Methodus* and the *République* for her reconstruction, Rose examined the whole span of Bodin's oeuvre, from his second earliest published work (the 1559 *Oratio de instituenda in republica juventute*) to his very last (the *Theatrum* and the *Paradoxon*), without neglecting supposedly minor texts such as the *Sapientiae moralis epitome* of 1588 and various letters from Bodin's youth and old age.[7] Curiously though, Rose, who took into account the longer time span, also put forward the more strongly continuist interpretation, while Isnardi Parente, who focused on works relatively close to each other in time, identified a deep gulf between them. One would have expected the opposite outcome if their only grounds for disagreement had been the different time span that they each took into account. Surely, then, the roots of their divergence must lie elsewhere.

Bodin himself, I suggest, can teach us where. At a crucial moment in his *Paradoxon*, he makes an illuminating remark about the importance of semantic accuracy in philosophical debate. One of the reasons why philosophers have fought so hard over action and contemplation is, he says, the wide range of meanings that the term contemplation (*contemplatio*, *contemplation*) has accrued over time. Contemplation can be taken to mean

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[3] Margherita Isnardi Parente, "Introduzione", in Jean Bodin, *I sei libri dello Stato*, vol. 1, ed. Margherita Isnardi Parente (Turin: UTET, 1964), pp. 14-17; "A proposito di un'interpretazione cinquecentesca del rapporto teoria-prassi in Aristotele e Platone", *La parola dal testo* 87 (1962): 436-447.

[4] Paul L. Rose, *Bodin and The Great God of Nature: The Moral and Religious Universe of a Judaiser* (Geneva: Droz, 1980), p. 98. Rose does not explicitly engage with Isnardi Parente's theory of Bodin's "contemplative turn"; he also never cites Isnardi Parente's "Introduzione", which is where she expounds this theory most clearly. He does however cite other publications where she discusses Bodin's views on action and contemplation: "A proposito di un'interpretazione", in particular, is cited on p. 49, n. 22.

[5] Rose, *Bodin and the Great God of Nature*, pp. 96-98.

[6] Scholars coming after Isnardi Parente and Rose have tended to follow one or the other of these interpretations: for instance, Girolamo Cotroneo and Howell Lloyd have taken sides with Isnardi Parente, while Anna Maria Lazzarino del Grosso has favoured Rose's continuist view. See: Girolamo Cotroneo, "Ancora sui rapporti fra la *Methodus* e la *République*", *Il pensiero politico* 14/1 (1981): 18-25 (esp. 19-20); Howell A. Lloyd, *Jean Bodin, 'This Pre-Eminent Man of France': An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), Chapter 9 ("Vita Contemplativa"); Anna Maria Lazzarino del Grosso, "Per una storia delle idee sull'adozione nella Francia moderna: Jean Bodin", in *Studi politici in onore di Luigi Firpo*, ed. Silvia Rota Ghibaudi and Franco Barcia, vol. 1 (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1990), p. 693. A slightly different solution (though closer overall to Isnardi Parente than to Rose) is offered in Marie-Dominique Couzinet, *Sub specie hominis: Études sur le savoir humain au XVIe siècle* (Paris: Vrin, 2007), p. 98.

[7] These letters were first published by Jean Moreau Reibel, "Bodin et la Ligue d'après de lettres inédites", *Humanisme et Renaissance* 2 (1935): 422-440. They were then reprinted in Jean Bodin, *Selected Writings on Philosophy, Religion and Politics*, ed. Paul Lawrence Rose (Geneva: Droz, 1980). This collection also contains both versions (Latin and French) of the *Paradoxon*; however, no English translation is provided.

many things, from careful study of the physical world to meditation over abstract concepts and introspective examination; some even use it – not quite to Bodin's satisfaction, as we shall see – to denote our enjoyment (*fruitio*, *ioüissance*) of God. Such semantic richness, which Bodin equates with vagueness, has led philosophers into endless disputes, as they inadvertently use the word in different ways and therefore fail to understand one another. What Bodin is suggesting here is not that the whole historical debate on action and contemplation should be discarded as one big misunderstanding. There is of course much more at stake for him in this debate than a simple question of semantics. His point is that the terms in which the question has traditionally been posed are not conducive to finding a solution; if anything, they complicate matters further. The debate over action and contemplation is, in this sense, a *question mal posée*, and Bodin's first and chief contribution – as he himself sees it, and as I shall attempt to show in this article – is that of bringing some clarity to the matter.[8]

The problem is that Bodin himself had not always been so consistent in his use of terms. It actually testifies to his earnestness that throughout his career he would change his mind not only on the relative value of action and contemplation, but also on what these words mean in the first place: his philosophical rigour compelled him to keep the question open until a satisfactory solution was found – and, meanwhile, to go on testing and trying. The result for us is that we cannot just take for granted that "contemplation" means the same thing in Bodin's earlier works as it does in the later ones. The interpretive disagreement between Isnardi Parente and Rose might have something to do with this. Rose, though he took into account the whole span of Bodin's oeuvre (including the *Paradoxon*), was evidently more focused on content than on the vocabulary used to express it, and thus he failed to notice Bodin's lexical *mise-à-point* and the conceptual consequences that came with it. His continuist reading of Bodin's position on action and contemplation, as we shall see, does not withstand the test of close textual analysis, although his work has a number of other important merits.[9] Isnardi Parente, on the other hand, offered a convincing, philology-based examination of Bodin's intellectual evolution on this matter between the *Methodus* and the *République*. But since the most remarkable change in his attitude to the problem took place *after* the *République*, her reconstruction fails to cover it and needs to be complemented by further study.

With this article, I would like to offer a re-examination of Bodin's position on action and contemplation which, like Isnardi Parente's, pays close attention to Bodin's philosophical vocabulary but, like Rose's, takes into account a longer arc of his writing. My analysis will revolve around three main works: the *Methodus*, the *République*, and the *Paradoxon*, although it could (and should) be fruitfully extended to other works by Bodin in the future. Although the *Paradoxon* (in both its Latin and French versions) was the last of these three works to be published, it is also a particularly good place to start, as it is in this text that Bodin criticizes previous thinkers for using the word contemplation inconsistently and then sets out to seek a new term that may aptly designate the «consideration of the highest and most eminent being» (*inspectio nobilissimae ac praestantissimae rei*), that is God.[10] This divine contemplation Bodin chooses to call «reflection» (*actus reflexus* in Latin, *reflexion* in French), in order to

[8] This Aristotelian call for definitional precision may seem rather ironic in a work that purports to be (and indeed is on many levels) a thorough rejection of Aristotle's ethics. It is, however, the exact same move that Bodin adopts in the *Methodus* and in the *République* with regards to Aristotle's politics (I refer for this to my article "Sovereignty, Territory, and Population in Jean Bodin's *République*", *French Studies* 72/1 (2018): 17-34, esp. 20-23). More needs to be said about Bodin's appropriation of Aristotelian strategies within the context of a systematic critique of Aristotle's philosophy; for a helpful starting point, see Giuseppe Cambiano, *Polis. Un modello per la cultura europea* (Bari and Rome: Laterza, 2000) pp. 133-167.

[9] See David B. Ruderman's helpful review of Rose's book, which appeared in *Renaissance Quarterly* 35/2 (1982): 284-287.

[10] Bodin, *Paradoxon*, p. 40.

distinguish it more clearly from contemplation proper, which for him consists exclusively in the observation of lower and impermanent realities (*res terrestres et fluxae*).[11]

This word, reflection, is an interesting choice. Why did Bodin choose it? What exactly did he mean by it? Why did he find it helpful for clarifying the question of action and contemplation? Was he the first to use the word in this context, or was he drawing on other sources – and if so, which ones? We do not currently have an answer to these questions, although helpful clues can be found in two studies by Pierre Mesnard and Marie-Dominique Couzinet respectively.[12] To the best of my knowledge, Mesnard and Couzinet are the only ones who have paid any attention at all to Bodin's theory of reflection, followed more recently by Howell Lloyd who, however, only mentioned it in passing and without identifying it as a coherent theory.[13] While Mesnard and Couzinet focused primarily on the ethical implications of Bodin's theory of reflection, in this article I shall explore two further and interrelated dimensions of this theory: its ties to Bodin's theology and spirituality, on the one hand, and its repercussions on the debate over action and contemplation, on the other.[14] I shall also investigate in some depth the question of Bodin's sources, which has hitherto remained completely unaddressed.

2. FROM CONTEMPLATION TO REFLECTION

Bodin's *Paradoxon* takes the form of a dialogue between a father and a son working together through a series of complex moral and theological questions. Writing on such topics in the middle of a civil war – much of the work was composed in 1591, in one of the most dramatic phases of the French wars of religion – did not amount for Bodin to a form of escapism: as he explains in his preface to the Latin version, dedicated to the young son of the then secretary of State Louis Potier,[15] the discussion around «virtue and the greatest good and evil» (*de virtutibus ac finibus bonorum et malorum*) is the most vital one to have when civil society breaks down and the only hope for the future lies in educating the young.[16] In this sense, the *Paradoxon* pursues the same kind of direct intervention in contemporary matters that Bodin had previously sought to make with political works such as the *République*; what is new is that he now perceives the scale and depth of the crisis to be such that no political solution will help unless it is accompanied by a complete rethinking of the ethical foundations of human life. Thus, what Bodin offers in the *Paradoxon* is a reconsideration of some classic questions of moral philosophy that are to a certain extent perennial but also carry a special importance for the current crisis in France.

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[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Pierre Mesnard, "Jean Bodin et la critique de la morale d'Aristote", *Revue thomiste* 49 (1949): 542-562 (esp. 548-550); Marie-Dominique Couzinet, "La philosophie morale de Jean Bodin dans le *Paradoxe* de 1596. Hypothèse de lecture", in *L'Œuvre de Jean Bodin. Actes du colloque tenu à Lyon à l'occasion du quatrième centenaire de sa mort (11-13 janvier 1996)* (Paris: Champion, 2004), pp. 367-383. A revised version of this article is reprinted in Couzinet, *Sub specie hominis*, pp. 105-123.

[13] Lloyd, *Jean Bodin*, p. 234. As the rest of this article will show, I respectfully disagree with Lloyd's interpretation of Bodin's notions of contemplation and reflection. Lloyd argues that Bodin understands contemplation of earthly things as passive and «reflection» of higher realities as active; I believe that Bodin's texts indicate the opposite.

[14] Couzinet does pay some attention to the theological dimension, but only with regard to whether the *fruitio Dei* that Bodin has in mind results from an act of the intellect or of the will (*Sub specie hominis*, pp. 111-112). This point will be discussed in sections 2 and 3 below. Couzinet also makes an interesting remark about contemplation and ecstasy in "Histoire et méthode chez Bodin", *Il pensiero politico*, 30/2 (1997): 217-232 (esp. 230-231).

[15] See Andrea Suggi, "Introduzione", in Bodin, *Paradosso sulla virtù*, p. XI.

[16] Bodin, *Paradoxon*, p. 8 (note the evident Ciceronian flavour in Bodin's words). For interesting insights about Bodin's views on pedagogy, see Pierre Mesnard, "Jean Bodin devant le problème de l'éducation", *Recueil de travaux de l'Académie des Sciences morales et politiques*, 112 (1959): 217-228.

First and foremost among these questions is that of the greatest good: what is it and how can we reach it? The *Paradoxon* opens precisely on this question, and on the son's great surprise in discovering that his father's views on the matter seem to contradict common opinion. He recalls his father saying that «the greatest and highest good of man does not consist in the action of virtue», nor virtue itself «in a mean»; he is shocked now to find that this is a great paradox (literally, "against common opinion") unwelcome to most.[17] The son's request for clarification gradually leads him and his father into a wide-ranging philosophical discussion that betrays the father's (and Bodin's) anti-Aristotelian inclinations at each turn. For of course it is Aristotle who defines virtue as a mean between two extremes of vice.[18] And it is again Aristotle who identifies man's highest good with happiness and happiness with «activity in accordance with virtue» (ἐνέργεια κατ᾽ ἀρετήν).[19] In contesting this latter point in particular, Bodin was well aware of taking issue with a tenet of Aristotelian ethics that had fuelled debate for centuries – and still does. Scholars of Aristotle have often been puzzled by his position on the greatest good since it appears to involve a contradiction: how can Aristotle's identification of happiness with morally virtuous activity in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* be reconciled with his praise of contemplation (θεωρία) as the highest form of life in Book X? If man's greatest good consists in moral action, how can it also consist in a life of pure contemplation? Is contemplation not the opposite of action? As Stephen S. Bush observes, Aristotle's words raise questions «about the status of morally virtuous activity and about the relation between that activity and contemplation».[20]

Bodin would have agreed with Aristotle's modern interpreters in finding this point perplexing. In both his *Methodus* and *République* he had pondered over the apparent contradiction between *Politics* I and VII, where Aristotle seems to favour an active life (βίος πρακτικός), and *Nicomachean Ethics* X, where he praises the contemplative life (βίος θεωρητικός) instead.[21] The matter, Bodin notes in the *Methodus*, is especially sensitive because if we accept that contemplation is man's greatest good, then we must also accept that individual good and common good do not coincide: for clearly a state could never survive if all of its members devoted themselves to pure intellectual pursuits.[22] This is yet again a classic Aristotelian question (discussed in *Nicomachean Ethics* I and *Politics* VII) that Bodin thinks

[17] «Valde novum plerisque visum est quod ita pridem abs te, Pater optime, audivi cum diceres nec ullam virtutem in mediocritate, nec summum hominis extremumque bonum in virtutis actione consistere […]. Libenter cum bona tua venia peterem […] ut quid de virtutibus deque bonorum et malorum finibus sentias explicare velis.» (Bodin, *Paradoxon*, p. 10).

[18] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II.5-9, 1106a14 – 1109b26.

[19] *Nicomachean Ethics*, X.7, 1177a12. At I.6, 1098a16-17, Aristotle had defined happiness more specifically as an «activity *of the soul* in accordance with virtue» (ψυχῆς ἐνέργεια κατ᾽ ἀρετήν), which already brings us closer to the question of the contemplative life. Note that this definition is actually partial: for Aristotle virtue alone does not suffice for happiness (this was instead the Stoic position); one must also enjoy a range of «external goods» (τὰ ἐκτὸς ἀγαθά), such as health and wealth, which are recognized as preconditions for true and complete happiness (*Nicomachean Ethics*, I.11, 1100b22 – 1101a16). Bodin's Aristotle is therefore (at least in this case) a rather Stoicized Aristotle.

[20] Stephen S. Bush, "Divine and Human Happiness in *Nicomachean Ethics*", *The Philosophical Review* 117/1 (2008): 49-75 (esp. 49). See also David Roochnik, "What is *Theoria*? *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 10.7–8", *Classical Philology* 104/1 (2009): 69-82. Note that Aristotle's text literally says «virtuous activity» (or, better still, «activity according to virtue»), not «morally virtuous activity»; the door is left open for a possible interpretation of this activity in terms of *intellectual* virtue. To translate ἀρετή as *moral* virtue is to over-interpret Aristotle's text and thus potentially to overemphasize the contradiction between his accounts of *praxis* in Books 1 and 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. However, since Bodin also clearly interprets this passage in terms of *moral* virtue and not just of virtue in general, I have found it helpful to report a contemporary interpretation that frames the question in similar terms.

[21] See Isnardi Parente, "A proposito di un'interpretazione" and "Introduzione".

[22] Jean Bodin, *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem*, ed. Sara Miglietti (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2013), III.16, p. 128.

the philosopher framed well but was ultimately unable to solve: «Aristotle was deeply troubled by this difficult point, nor could he disentangle himself from it».[23]

Bodin's own solution in the *Methodus* is the same as that of the ancient Roman scholar Varro, which he would have found in Augustine: «If we want the same thing to be good for the single individual and for the whole community, then we must identify the good of the living man neither with contemplation nor with action, but with a mix of both».[24] Note that for Bodin this ideal refers specifically to man in his earthly state (*bonum hominis vitam agentis*). A life of pure contemplation would not even be viable for man in this life, as even the most contemplative individual has bodily needs to attend to: as Bodin points out, «the soul cannot enjoy pure contemplation until it is completely detached from the body».[25] This apparently incidental remark is in fact crucial, as Bodin's change of heart on this point will lead him in due course to reconsider the whole issue of action and contemplation. Such a change is already visible in the *République*: here again Bodin draws attention to Aristotle's internal contradictions before pointing to Varro's mixed ideal as a possible solution, except that in this case Bodin ends up rejecting the Varronian compromise that he had previously accepted:

> Marcus Varro had happiness consist in [a mix of] action and contemplation; in my opinion, he should have said that although the life of man needs both action and contemplation, his supreme good consists in contemplation, which the Academics have called "the pleasant death" and the Jews "the precious death", because it steals the soul from the mud of the body in order to deify it.[26]

Isnardi Parente was right to see a shift between the *Methodus* and the *République*: as this passage shows, Bodin's ideal in the latter work is certainly more contemplative than in the former. But the way in which this shift took place is almost as important as the shift itself. What Bodin had previously discarded as a physical impossibility (i.e., pure contemplation in man's earthly state) is now accepted as an exceptional but not impossible occurrence: man *can* experience pure contemplation even in his earthly life, just not as a permanent condition but as a moment of blissful, temporary detachment from his physical body – a sort of anticipation of death, or, rather, of life after death.[27] In support of this idea Bodin cites a number of ancient

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[23] «id quod Aristotelem valde conturbavit, nec seipsum ex ea difficultate explicare potuit»; *Methodus*, III.16, p. 128. Bodin himself will give a different solution to this problem in the *République*, where he argues that the highest good for both states and individuals is contemplation, even though the material necessities of life on earth often leave very little space for it; hence, he notes, the importance of respecting a weekly day of rest from active life: «la fin principale de [la Republique bien ordonnée] gist aux vertus contemplatives, iaçoit que les actions politiques soyent preallables, et les moins illustres soyent les premieres: comme faire provisions necessaires, pour entretenir et defendre la vie des subiects: et neantmoins telles actions se rapportent aux morales, et celles cy aux intellectuelles, la fin desquelles est la contemplation du plus beau subiect qui soit, et qu'on puisse imaginer. Aussi voyons nous, que Dieu a laissé six iours pour toutes actions, estant la vie de l'homme subiecte pour la plus-part à icelles: mais il a ordonné, que le septieme, qu'il avoit beni sus tous les autres, seroit chommé, comme le sainct iour du repos, à fin de l'employer en la contemplation de ses oeuvres, de sa loy, et de ses louanges» (*Les Six livres de la République* (Paris: Jacques Dupuys, 1579), I.1, p. 7).

[24] «bonum hominis vitam agentis, neque otio, neque negotio; sed misto genere definiendum nobis erit, si volumus idem esse unius hominis, ac totius civitatis bonum» (*Methodus*, III.16, p. 128). Varro's solution is reported in Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XIX.3.

[25] «neque enim mens pura illa contemplatione prius frui potest, quam a corpore penitus avulsa fuerit» (*Methodus*, III.16, p. 130). Compare with Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X.9, 1178b33-35.

[26] «Par ainsi Marc Varron, qui a mis la felicité en action et contemplation, eust mieux dit, à mon advis, que la vie de l'homme a besoin d'action et de contemplation: mais que le souverain bien gist en contemplation, que les Academiques ont appellé la mort plaisante et les Hebrieux la mort precieuse, d'autant qu'elle ravist l'ame hors de la fange corporelle, pour la deïfier» (*République*, I.1, p. 6).

[27] Bodin does point out that this condition of detachment from the body cannot last long in man's earthly state: prolonged contemplation would certainly mean actual and not just metaphorical death («l'homme ne peut vivre longuement, si l'ame est si fort ravie en contemplation, qu'on en perde le boire et le manger», *République*, I.1, p. 6).

and modern authorities, ranging with characteristic eclecticism from Plato (the *Phaedo*) and the Neoplatonists (particularly Ficino) to «the Jews» – Leone Ebreo, but also Moses Maimonides.[28] What Bodin found (or thought he had found) in these authors was the possibility of a different type of contemplation from the one he had seen described in Aristotle. Isnardi Parente rightly notes that Bodin's contemplation is not «an intellectual exercise» of the kind discussed in *Nicomachean Ethics* X; it is much closer to a religious experience – a «contemplative mysticism», in her own words.[29] While Aristotle sees the contemplative life as the life of the gods – an ideal to which man can strive but without ever fully attaining it[30] – Bodin sees it as a life that draws us closer to God and allows us to become one with Him.

But there is also another major way in which Bodin's contemplation differs from Aristotle's *theoria*. The latter, as we have seen, is said to consist in an activity of the mind (ἡ τοῦ νοῦ ἐνέργεια) or of the soul (ψυχῆς ἐνέργεια).[31] But this is precisely the point that Bodin finds problematic: how can contemplation be a form of activity? Is this not in contradiction to Aristotle's own principle (stated in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI and in other places) that whatever is perfect is sought for its own sake and not for the sake of something else? If contemplation is the highest form of life and man's greatest good, then surely it must be perfect in itself. However, Aristotle himself states that activity is movement and movement always tends to something outside itself – a state of rest towards which it strives. If contemplation is a form of activity, albeit of an intellectual rather than a physical kind, this means that it consists in a movement towards something outside itself (e.g., the attainment of knowledge). If this is the case, then clearly contemplation itself is not man's highest good but merely a stage towards it.

Bodin's reasoning is not fleshed out so fully in the *République*, even less so in the *Methodus*, and in both works his attempt at unravelling Aristotle's contradictions remains marred with contradictions of its own. It was not until some fifteen years later that these thoughts would receive a more coherent treatment in the *Paradoxon* – a work centrally concerned with the question of the greatest good, as discussed at the beginning of this section.[32] Bodin's starting point in this work is the idea of a hierarchy of goods and stages towards happiness, which he probably derived from Aristotle (but he would also have found it discussed at length in Cicero and Augustine, two of his favourite authors),[33] and which he had first introduced in the *République* to explain the "architectonic" relationship between action and contemplation. Action was presented there not as equal and complementary to contemplation, as was the case in the *Methodus*, but rather as a necessary first step towards it: thus without denying that human life requires both action and contemplation, Bodin was able to present one (contemplation) as a goal in itself and the other (action) as simply a means to an end.[34] We have seen however that by this time Bodin had already begun to question whether contemplation can indeed be understood as the highest good (and thus as a goal in itself). Surely the contemplation that could be understood in these terms was not the one described by Aristotle, that «activity of the soul» that led one into insoluble contradiction. The simple yet clever solution that Bodin advanced in the *Paradoxon* consisted in positing a further stage beyond *theoria* (intellectual contemplation) that constituted the ultimate goal of both action and contemplation and the authentic highest good of mankind. That further stage Bodin defined as «the full enjoyment of the most excellent and most beautiful thing of all [i.e., God], which

[28] Isnardi Parente, "A proposito di un'interpretazione", 441-447.
[29] Isnardi Parente, "A proposito di un'interpretazione", 446.
[30] *Nicomachean Ethics*, X.8, 1178b21-23.
[31] *Nicomachean Ethics*, X.7, 1177b19; I.6, 1098a16-17.
[32] See Bodin, *Paradoxon*, pp. 62-64.
[33] On this particular aspect of Cicero's and Augustine's ethics, see Elena Cavalcanti, "La revisione dell'etica classica nel *De civitate Dei*", in *Il* De civitate Dei. *L'opera, le interpretazioni, l'influsso*, ed. Elena Cavalcanti, (Rome-Freiburg-Wien: Herder, 1996), pp. 293-323.
[34] Bodin, *République*, I.1, p. 7.

consists in reflection» (*rei omnium praestantissimae ac pulcherrimae plena fruiti[o], quae in actu reflexo versatur*).[35]

In the *Paradoxon*, these words are uttered by the father (Bodin's spokesperson throughout the dialogue) and prompt a series of follow-up questions from the son that shed further light on the meaning of Bodin's *actus reflexus*. First the father makes a distinction between reflection and contemplation, stating that «the greatest happiness of all consists neither in action, as most people think, nor in contemplation, as many others also think, but in a reflection [*actus reflexus*] of God's essence, that is, in a most bright effusion of His light onto us».[36] Bodin could not have put it more clearly: contemplation (commonly conceived) and reflection are two different things. It is not just a matter of vocabulary: while he does blame Aristotle for covering the terms "action" and "contemplation" in ambiguity and contradiction by using "contemplation" to designate an activity of the mind,[37] Bodin clearly intends his "reflection" to do more than simply replace the word contemplation in the old debate; he is hoping to redefine the debate itself, by introducing a *tertium quid* that is neither action nor contemplation and that can shift the discussion onto new grounds.

His intentions become clearer in the ensuing discussion, where the father brings out some crucial implications of this concept of reflection: it highlights man's dependence on God (as opposed to Greco-Roman contemplation, which emphasized the virtuous man's *autarcheia* or self-sufficiency);[38] it preserves an ontological distinction between the infinite Creator and the finite creature by presenting their relationship in terms of similarity and proximity rather than of identity and union (a notion that Bodin attributes to the Neoplatonists and discards as absurd);[39] and it draws attention to the passive nature of man's enjoyment of God, which happens not by human effort but by God's free effusion of His divine light.[40] While each of these points is extremely important and would deserve extensive treatment, it is this last point in particular that matters most for understanding Bodin's concept of reflection as opposed to the Aristotelian notion of *theoria* or contemplation.

Contemplation, for Aristotle, is the highest possible activity that the highest part of the human soul (i.e. the intellect) can perform: as such, it represents at once the apex of human fulfillment and man's most distinctive function – the one that sets him apart from all other beings. Bodin agrees with Aristotle that man's capacity for intellectual contemplation is distinctive and unique. He also agrees that contemplation is the farthest and highest that man can go on his own. But unlike Aristotle he does not believe that contemplation represents the apex of human fulfillment, because that apex lies in the enjoyment of God and God, by His radical alterity, infinity, and transcendence, cannot be an object of intellectual contemplation. This is why man's encounter with God must happen by God's initiative, not man's: such is the gulf between creature and Creator that an active effort on man's part could never successfully bridge it. In order to encounter God, man must, in a sense, turn off exactly that part of himself that enables him to contemplate, i.e. the active intellect, and let himself be inhabited by a higher

[35] Bodin, *Paradoxon*, p. 32. The French version reads: «la pleine et parfaite ioüissance de la plus belle et plus excellente chose de toutes, qui est la fruition de Dieu qui ne se peut avoir que par reflexion» (*Paradoxe*, in Bodin, *Paradosso della virtù*, p. 140).

[36] «Ut intelligamus foelicitatem omnium maximam nec in actione consistere, ut plerique, nec in contemplatione, ut plures etiam arbitrantur: sed in actu reflexo divinae essentiae, id est, in clarissima lucis erga nos effusione» (Bodin, *Paradoxon*, p. 34).

[37] See Bodin, *Paradoxon*, pp. 40 and 62.

[38] Bodin, *Paradoxon*, p. 32.

[39] *Ibid.* («sapientiae magister Deum proximum fieri scripsit iis qui illum ardenter amant, non tamen uniri dixit»; «Deo quidem adhaerere et cohaerere creaturae licet, non tamen uniri»).

[40] Bodin, *Paradoxon*, p. 44. Rose explains in what ways Bodin's concepts of "effusion" and "illumination" differ from the Christian concept of grace (*Jean Bodin and the Great God of Nature*, pp. 102-110); he makes many important points, although he might be generally overstating his case.

intellect (the agent intellect, or *intellectus actuosus*) that fills him with its light. In other words, man's encounter with God is not an action but a being-acted-upon: a state of passive receptivity.

> Such enjoyment [of God] is passive, not active, therefore it is the exact opposite of the contemplation of things that are inferior to the human spirit: in this case the spirit acts, as it were, in contemplating them; but when it ascends above itself to the agent intellect (that is the Angel) or to God who clears away the darkness of our soul by His divine light, then it lets God act in it: just as the eye acts when it gazes on the earth, but it is acted upon when it turns towards the sun.[41]

This passage establishes a series of important dichotomies between reflection and contemplation. Contemplation is active, reflection is passive; contemplation looks down onto lower realities, reflection looks up towards God; contemplation is a seeing (the literal meaning of the Greek word *theoria*), reflection is a being blinded by a dazzling light. The introduction of the eye analogy (which reminds us of Plato's allegory of the cave) is especially valuable because it enables Bodin to stress the non-intellectual nature of man's encounter with God. He has already pointed out that the human intellect is unable to reach God through a natural ascent from lower to higher realities, on account of the immense ontological gap that separates the creature from its Creator. He now stresses that even when God personally reaches out to man and sheds His light on him, the human intellect (*mens*) is unable to sustain this divine light, just as the eye is blinded by the sun's overwhelming brightness. Thus, when the son suggests that the greatest good of man might lie in the «right knowledge of God», his father corrects him: complete happiness comes not from knowing but from loving and enjoying God; it has to do with desire and will much more than with intellect and cognition. We shall return to this important remark in the next section, where its philosophical background will be explained more fully.[42] For the moment, I hope to have clarified what compelled Bodin to introduce this new notion of reflection into the traditional debate on action and contemplation; what exactly he meant by it, and how he felt that this notion would modify and advance the debate; and what implications it had for his understanding of the God-man relationship (but also, vice versa, how his understanding of this relationship shaped his definition of reflection). It is now time to turn to an investigation of Bodin's possible sources, which will allow us not only to assess the relative originality of his theory of reflection, but also to uncover some lesser-known influences operating on his thought.

3. SCHOLASTIC AND MYSTICAL ORIGINS OF BODIN'S THEORY OF REFLECTION

In the previous section we have seen that Bodin conceived of happiness not as «activity according to virtue», as did Aristotle, but as a passive state in which the soul receives and reflects God's light. As the father puts it to his son in the *Paradoxon*: «Man's supreme happiness lies in reflection [*actus reflexus*], because we are made happy not by acting [*agendo*],

[41] My translation is based on the French version, which is slightly more eloquent («telle iouissance est passive, et non pas active, qui est du tout contraire à la contemplation des choses inferieurs à l'esprit humain, qui agit aucunement en les contemplant: mais quand il s'esleve par dessus soy mesme à l'intellect actuel, qui est l'Ange, ou à Dieu qui eclaircit de sa lumiere divine les tenebres de nos ames, alors il souffre que Dieu agisse en luy: tout ainsi que l'oeil agit quand il considere la terre: mais il souffre quand il se tourne vers le soleil»; *Paradoxe*, p. 143); but the passage is very similar in the Latin version («illam quam quaerimus, aut certe quaerere debemus, beatitatem […] patiendo adipiscimur: Mens enim cum inferiora contemplatur agit: cum vero ad superiora, scilicet ad intellectum actuosum et illustrantem humanae mentis caliginem, vel ad Deum ipsum fertur, tunc pati dicitur: non aliter quam oculus qui tunc agit cum terrestria et obscura intuetur: cum vero convertitur ad solem aut ad lucem, seipso splendidiorem dicitur pati»; *Paradoxon*, p. 40).

[42] On this point see also Couzinet, *Sub specie hominis*, pp. 111-112.

but by being acted upon [*patendo*]».[43] This section explores the question of Bodin's possible sources for this idea. We shall see that while he appears to have drawn the phrase *actus reflexus* from late scholastic debates, he gave it a new meaning by re-interpreting it in the light of other philosophical and theological traditions, including the mystical theology of Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa (or Cusanus).

The scholastic debate

The phrase *actus reflexus* is of late scholastic coinage: to the best of my knowledge, its earliest documented use is in Duns Scotus's *Ordinatio*, a collection of lectures on Peter Lombard's *Sentences* that Scotus delivered partly at Oxford and partly at Paris between 1298 and 1303 and that were published in much revised form by Scotus's pupils after his death.[44] Here we find the notion of *actus reflexus* used in two different contexts. Scotus first introduces it in *Ordinatio I* to distinguish between love of God (defined as an *actus rectus*) and love of one's neighbour (defined as an *actus reflexus*). As Antonie Vos explains, «the *actus rectus* of love is immediately related to God» whereas «loving my neighbor is an *actus reflexus* which mediates the act of loving God: I will that my neighbor also loves God as he is in himself so that I love him too.»[45] While an *actus reflexus* in this sense is «an act of the will which becomes the object of another act of will (a second-order act of will)»,[46] elsewhere in his *Ordinatio* Scotus expands the semantic capacity of this term to include intellectual acts as well. In this other sense, the distinction between *actus rectus* and *actus reflexus* can be invoked to explain the difference between simple cognitive acts (*x* knows *y*) and self-reflexive cognitive acts (*x* knows that s/he knows *y*) – in other words, between knowledge and self-knowledge.

It was in this latter sense that the distinction rose to importance in the early decades of the fourteenth century. At this time, a heated discussion about the nature of happiness took place in Paris as an outgrowth of an earlier and much larger debate known as the "controversy of the Correctoria". This controversy began shortly after Thomas Aquinas's death in 1274 and raged throughout the last quarter of the century, opposing Thomas's supporters (for the most part Dominicans) to his critics (mainly Franciscans).[47] While the debate extended to many topics – including the eternity of the world and the relationship between reason and faith – one of the central issues was the nature of happiness: broadly speaking, while the Dominicans maintained that happiness consists in the intellectual vision of God (also known as the *visio beatifica*), the Franciscans argued that it consists in love of God leading to a complete transformation of the human subject.[48] The dispute revolved in part around a different interpretation of Augustine's doctrine of illumination, which formed the basis of Thomas's theory of knowledge: according to this doctrine, human knowledge is possible thanks to the human intellect's participation in the eternal light of God's intellect.[49] But when it came to

[43] «beatitatem hominis maximam in actu reflexo versari diximus, quia patiendo non agendo beamur» (*Paradoxon*, p. 43). Note that this passage has no direct parallel in the French version.

[44] For the complex history of this text, see Antonie Vos *et al.*, "Introduction", in *Duns Scotus on Divine Love: Texts and Commentary on Goodness and Freedom, God and Humans*, ed. Antonie Vos *et al.* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 3-5.

[45] Antonie Vos, *The Theology of John Duns Scotus* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), p. 299.

[46] Vos *et al.*, "Introduction", p. 71.

[47] For an overview of this controversy, see Mark D. Jordan, "The Controversy of the Correctoria and the Limits of Metaphysics", *Speculum*, 57/2 (1982): 292-314.

[48] Thomas Jetschke, *Deus ut tentus vel visus: Die Debatte um die Seligkeit im reflexiven Akt (ca. 1293–1320)* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 15-16.

[49] The exact meaning and implications of this doctrine are still widely debated among scholars of Thomas: see Wayne John Hankey, "*Participatio divini luminis*, la doctrine de Thomas d'Aquin sur l'intellect agent: notre capacité à la contemplation", in *Vers la contemplation. Etudes sur la syndérèse et les modalités de la contemplation de l'Antiquité à la Renaissance*, ed. Christian Trottmann (Paris: Champion, 2007), pp. 121-155.

human knowledge *of God*, it was unclear how participation in the divine intellect worked. Was the vision of God also an act of the intellect or was it a unitive, mystical experience made possible by love? The Dominicans favoured the former position, while the Franciscans leaned towards the latter, thus reenacting a tension that according to some scholars was inherent in Augustine's own thought.[50]

Towards the end of the thirteenth century, the Dominican theologian Jean Quidort, also known as John of Paris, set out to settle the quarrel by proposing what he saw as a compromise solution. What he suggested was in fact quite new: he maintained that the «direct vision of God» (*visio nuda divinae essentiae*) was not the highest possible degree of happiness but rather a precondition for it; true happiness instead consisted in the pleasure (*fruitio*, *delectatio*) that comes with possessing God (*tentio spiritualis*) and, more importantly, with perceiving and seeing oneself possess Him (*perceptio et visio huius tentionis*).[51] Though widely contested,[52] Quidort's position was later adopted and modified by another Dominican, Durandus of Saint-Pourçain, and it was in this revised form that his ideas reached a later generation of thinkers.[53] Building on Quidort, but taking his language from Duns Scotus, Durandus argued that the perfection of human happiness lay not in the «direct act» (*actus rectus*) of knowing God, but in one's *awareness* of that act, that is, in the «reflexive act» (*actus reflexus*) of knowing that we know Him.[54] Durandus's theory was influential, but extremely controversial.[55] In Paris, it gave birth to a lively debate that in the 1310s and 1320s involved some of the most prominent scholastic thinkers of the day, such as Prosper of Reggio Emilia, John of Pouilly, Guy Terrena (Guido Terreni), and Peter of Palude. Their key arguments were summarized around 1325 by the Carmelitan theologian John Baconthorpe, who carefully considered both positions and ultimately took a firm stance against Durandus's theory of *actus reflexus*.[56]

It was through Baconthorpe, I suggest, that Bodin came into contact with the theory of happiness as *actus reflexus*. While the language of *actus reflexus* is already present in Duns Scotus, of whose works Bodin was a keen reader,[57] it is only in the early fourteenth-century controversy surrounding Durandus that the phrase is used with specific reference to the

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They were also subject to debate during the controversy of the Correctoria. Jean Devriendt has stressed that both the Franciscans and the Dominicans were consciously operating within the Augustinian tradition of illumination, and that there is no evidence for assuming (as is often the case) any rigid dichotomy between Franciscans/Augustinians on the one hand and Dominicans/Aristotelians on the other hand ("Les questions posées par le lexique latin utilisé par Eckhart dans les thématiques du sujet, de l'intellect et de l'image", in *Intellect, sujet, image chez Eckhart et Nicolas de Cues*, ed. Marie-Anne Vannier (Paris: Cerf, 2014), p. 60).

[50] See Robert E. Lauder, "Augustine: Illumination, Mysticism and Person", in *Augustine: Mystic and Mystagogue. Collectanea Augustiniana*, ed. Frederick Van Fleteren, Joseph C. Schnaubelt and Joseph Reino (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), pp. 177-205.

[51] J.-P. Mueller, "Les critiques de la thèse de Jean Quidort sur la béatitude formelle", *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale*, 15 (1948): 152-170.

[52] Mueller, "Les critiques de la thèse de Jean Quidort", 153.

[53] Jetschke, *Deus ut tentus vel visus*, p. 8.

[54] According to Russell L. Friedman, Durandus had a theological/ontological reason for arguing this: «Because God is distinct from us, he can't be the immediate object of our enjoyment but only through the act by which we attain him. Thus, our act of attaining God is the immediate object of our enjoyment or *fruitio*; God is the remote object» ("On the Trail of a Philosophical Debate: Durandus of St.-Pourçain vs. Thomas Wylton on Simultaneous Acts of the Intellect", in *Philosophical Debates at Paris in the Early Fourteenth Century*, ed. Stephen F. Brown, Thomas Dewender and Theo Kobusch (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), p. 444).

[55] Friedman, "On the Trail of a Philosophical Debate", p. 445.

[56] Jetschke, *Deus ut tentus vel visus*, pp. 511-529.

[57] See Margherita Isnardi Parente, "Il volontarismo di Jean Bodin: Maimonide o Duns Scoto?", *Il pensiero politico* 4/1 (1971): 21-45. The *Paradoxon* contains a number of marginal references to Scotus's commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. Mogens Chrom Jacobsen helpfully reminds us that Scotism was very widespread in sixteenth-century Paris (*Jean Bodin et le dilemme de la philosophie politique moderne* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000), p. 56).

question of happiness, which forms the context for Bodin's use of it in the *Paradoxon*. It may also not be a coincidence that the authorities cited by Baconthorpe in his critique of Durandus all resurface in Bodin's discussion of reflection in the *Paradoxon*: these include Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, various works of Augustine, and scriptural references (to John's Gospel, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, and the Psalms). Finally, it is certain that Bodin read Baconthorpe during the two years that he spent with the Carmelites in Paris: Baconthorpe's writings formed the backbone of the sixteenth-century Carmelite curriculum in theology and philosophy,[58] and a number of studies have convincingly shown that Bodin's scholastic education in Paris left a deeper mark on him than is sometimes assumed.[59] In fact, if we accept that he did draw his language of happiness as *actus reflexus* from Baconthorpe (as seems highly likely), these passages from the *Paradoxon* may be the strongest evidence to date that he retained a trace of his Carmelite upbringing into his late life.

Two points, however, must be noted. First, Baconthorpe expounds the doctrine of happiness as *actus reflexus* not in order to endorse it but in order to reject it. His conclusions are firmly in favour of Thomas's view of happiness as a direct intellectual vision of God (*per actum intellectus, qui est visio essentie divine*),[60] as opposed to a self-reflexive knowledge of this vision. Bodin, on the other hand, states that the greatest happiness of man lies «in a reflection of God's essence» (*in actu reflexo divinae essentiae*). Thus, even assuming that he did get his language of *actus reflexus* from Baconthorpe, he clearly was not drawing the same conclusions as the *doctor resolutus*. More importantly, Bodin seems to be giving the phrase *actus reflexus* a completely different meaning from the one documented in Baconthorpe. For Baconthorpe, as for the other scholastic theologians who participated in the Durandus debate, *actus reflexus* designates a particular type of cognitive act – one by which the intellect turns back to itself to become aware of its own acts. Bodin's *actus reflexus*, instead, has nothing to do with a self-reflexive cognitive act; in fact, as we shall see shortly, it has very little to do with a cognitive act at all. Properly speaking it is not even an *act*, since Bodin, as noted previously, is careful to remove any element of agency from the highest stage of man's encounter with God. Bodin's *actus reflexus* is best described as a condition of passive receptivity to God's light, one in which the purified soul is so clean and polished that it is able to reflect God's light nearly as brightly as it receives it, like a mirror; as the father tells his son,

> Ephemeral things, we may use and abuse; but as for eternal things, we enjoy them to the extent that is given to each of us according to our individual capacity, just like mirrors: the bigger and cleaner they are (as long as they are flat), the more accurately and brightly they reproduce the image of the things that stand before them, and yet they do not contain the things [that they reflect].[61]

This very rich passage gives a sense of Bodin's breadth of reading and eclectic use of sources. We note, first of all, the Augustinian distinction between *uti* and *frui*, which was central to Augustine's understanding of how man relates differently to God and to creation (a point that

[58] On Bodin's studies in Paris, see Jacobsen, *Jean Bodin et le dilemme*, pp. 55-58; on the Carmelite *cursus studiorum*, see Elisée de la Nativité, "La vie intellectuelle des Carmes", *Etudes carmélitaines, mystiques et missionnaires* 20/1 (1935): 93-157.

[59] Jacobsen, for instance, argues that Bodin's time with the Carmelites in Paris «does not seem to have left many traces on him» (*Jean Bodin et le dilemme*, p. 57). Both Rose (*Bodin and the Great God of Nature*) and Lloyd (*Jean Bodin*) have argued against this view. More generally on scholastic influences on Bodin's thought, see Isnardi Parente, "Il volontarismo di Jean Bodin".

[60] John Baconthorpe, *In I Sent.,* D. 1, Q. 1, A. 1, § 21, cited in Jetschke, *Deus ut tentus vel visus*, p. 601.

[61] «Rebus quidem caducis uti licet atque abuti, aeternis vero frui quantum cuique pro suo capto tribuitur, ut specula quo maiora sunt ac nitidiora, modo plana fuerint, eo veriorem ac splendidiorem referunt speciem obiectarum rerum, non tamen a speculis continentur» (Bodin, *Paradoxon*, p. 32). The analogy between mirrors and human souls is even more explicit in the French version, which adds at the end of the passage: «ainsi est il des creatures intellectuelles qui recoyvent la fruition de Dieu selon leur grandeur et capacité» (*Paradoxe*, p. 140).

is central to Bodin's distinction between contemplation and reflection, as discussed in the previous section).[62] The passage also bears traces of scholastic principles: Bodin's idea that the soul, like a mirror, receives and reflects God's light according to its capacity is a rearticulation of the old Thomist adage that «Whatever is received is received in the manner of the receiver» (*Quidquid recipitur, ad modum recipientis recipitur*). At the same time, Bodin's mirror analogy bears witness to his familiarity with another strand of literature that is not often identified as a major influence on him: the literature of late medieval and Renaissance mysticism. While this is obviously not the place for an exhaustive investigation of Bodin's mystical sources (nor for a discussion of what «mysticism» might mean in this context), what I would like to suggest here is that his re-reading of the scholastic debates on *actus reflexus* through the analogical language of late medieval and Renaissance mysticism allowed him to develop a relatively original position that was indebted to, and yet different from, both the scholastic and the mystical traditions.

The mystical tradition

As discussed above, Bodin seems to have drawn his language of happiness as *actus reflexus* from Baconthorpe, but with one crucial difference: while Baconthorpe used the phrase *actus reflexus* in the literal, technical sense of "self-reflexive cognitive act", Bodin used it in the non-literal, analogical sense of "state of passive receptivity in which the soul, like a mirror, reflects God's light more or less brightly according to its greater or lesser purity". Bodin's *actus reflexus* is not self-reflective, is not cognitive, is not even an act (in spite of its somewhat confusing name). If we want to find where Bodin could have taken inspiration for his understanding of happiness as a non-cognitive, mirror-like state of passive reflection of God's light, we need to turn to Cusanus's *De filiatione Dei* (*On Divine Sonship*), a work composed in 1445 and included in the Paris 1514 edition of his *Opera omnia* overseen by Jacques Lefèvre d'Etaples.

Cusanus's main argument in this text is that the divine sonship described in John 1:12 («Yet to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God [*filios dei fieri*]») should be interpreted as a form of *theosis* or *deificatio* (the "becoming godlike" of early Greek Christianity, which still occupied an important place in Augustine's thought)[63] and as an intuitive vision (*visio intuitiva*) of the One. Cusanus argues that this sonship-*theosis*-intuitive vision enables our intellect to break free from conceptual thinking and thus, «having been freed from these restrictive modes», to «obtain (by means of its intellectual light) the divine life as its happiness».[64] He is careful to distinguish his Christian understanding of *theosis* from that of late ancient Neoplatonism and Hermeticism, which seemed to uphold the possibility of an actual fusion of the human soul with the One leading to an identity of substance between man and God. The *theosis* that Cusanus is describing does not entail «identity of nature» (*identitas naturae*), which is of course reserved to Jesus Christ, «the Only Begotten Son» (*unigenitus*). Christ's sonship Cusanus calls

[62] Kimberly Georgedes, "*Uti/Frui* Distinction", in *The Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine*, ed. Karla Pollmann *et al.*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 1838-1843.
[63] David Vincent Meconi, "Augustine's Doctrine of Deification", in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, 2nd ed., ed. David Vincent Meconi and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 208-226.
[64] Nicholas of Cusa (Cusanus), *On Being a Son of God (De filiatione Dei)*, in *A Miscellany on Nicholas of Cusa*, trans. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1994), I.54, p. 161. For the Latin original, see the anastatic reprint of the Lefèvre edition: *Nicolai Cusae Cardinalis Opera. Parisiis 1514*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Unveränderter Nachdruck, 1962), fol. 65v: «sic scilicet ut foelicitatem suam intellectus noster ab his modis subtrahentibus liberatus sua intellectuali luce divinam vitam nanciscatur».

superabsoluta filiatio, or «superabsolute sonship», to avoid confusion with the «adoptive» sonship of ordinary human beings (*adoptionis participatio*).[65]

For those who object that even this adoptive sonship is impossible on account of God's incomprehensibility to the human intellect, Cusanus has a twofold answer. He first admits that the human experience of God is never of His actual essence but of the way in which His essence is manifested to us;[66] nevertheless, he reiterates that a face-to-face vision of God is possible and represents the summit of man's happiness, as all striving and all desires find rest in it («that objective truth is that which quiets all intellectual motion»).[67] But because God «transcends the intellect» and «is not found in the realm of the intellect», then the intellect cannot «attain unto Him beyond this heaven-of-being». The boundaries of human intellect coincide with creation; God, who transcends creation, «can be attained beyond the intellectual realm only negatively».[68] This is Cusanus's *via negativa*, which he derives to a large extent from Pseudo-Dionysius and which is too well known to dwell on here.[69] What matters is Cusanus's point that God cannot be reached through ordinary intellectual activity, because His absolute transcendence makes His essence unknowable to our intellect. We have seen in section 2 that this was also Bodin's opinion, and that the acknowledgment of a radical ontological gap between Creator and creatures was precisely what compelled him to distinguish between contemplation and reflection.

The similarities do not end here, because Cusanus then goes on to describe «the pathway of enjoying true being and life—viz., [the pathway] of the very lofty rapture of our [intellectual] spirit», which «is attained with peace and quietude when our spirit is filled with this manifestation of God's glory».[70] In this domain, Cusanus points out, one can only proceed by means of analogies and illustrations, because the experience of this «lofty rapture» lies beyond the realm of the speakable. Thus in order to describe the experience of God's manifested glory, Cusanus chooses to compare the human intellect to a mirror. The passage is long but worth quoting (almost) in full:

> [Visible] forms that are equal in straight mirrors appear to be less than equal in curved mirrors. Therefore, suppose that there is a most lofty Reflection of our Beginning, viz., the glorious God—a Reflection in which God Himself appears. Let this Reflection be a Mirror-of-truth that is without blemish, completely straight, most perfect, and without bounds.[71] And let all creatures be mirrors with different degrees of contraction and differently curved. Among these creatures let the intellectual natures be living mirrors that are straighter and more clearly reflecting [than the others]. And since [these intellectual mirrors] are

[65] Cusanus, *On Being a Son of God*, I.54, p. 161. Compare *Opera*, vol. 1, fol. 65r.

[66] «truth as it exists in something other [than itself] can be comprehended as existing only in some way other [than the way it exists in itself]» (Cusanus, *On Being a Son of God*, III.62, p. 165). Compare *Opera*, vol. 1, fol. 66r: «Arbitror te satis intellexisse veritatem: in alio non nisi aliter posse compraehendi».

[67] Cusanus, *On Being a Son of God*, I. 63, p. 165. Compare *Opera*, vol. 1, fol. 66r: «quietatio omnis intellectualis motus est veritas obiectalis».

[68] Cusanus, *On Being a Son of God*, I.64, p. 166. Compare *Opera*, vol. 1, fol. 66r: «Unde cum [deus] omnem intellectum sic exuperet: non reperitus sic in regione seu coelo intellectus nec potest per intellectum attingi extra ipsum coelum esse. Hinc deus cum non possit nisi negative extra intellectualem regionem attingi: tunc via fruitionis in veritate esse et vivere in coelo ipso empyreo scilicet altissimi raptus nostri spiritus attingitur cum pace et quiete quando satiatur spiritus in hac apparitione gloriae dei».

[69] See, for instance: H. Lawrence Bond, "Mystical Theology", in *Introducing Nicholas of Cusa: A Guide to a Renaissance Man*, ed. Christopher M. Bellitto, Thomas M. Izbicki and Gerald Christianson (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), pp. 205-231; William J. Hoye, "Die Grenze des Wissens. Nikolaus von Kues in Auseinandersetzung mit der mystischen Theologie des Dionysius Areopagita", in *Nikolaus von Kues in der Geschichte des Platonismus*, ed. Klaus Reinhardt and Harald Schwaetzer (Regensburg: Roderer, 2007), pp. 87-102; Edward Cranz, "Nicolaus Cusanus and Dionysius Areopagita", in *Nicholas of Cusa and the Renaissance*, ed. Thomas M. Izbicki and Gerald Christianson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 109-136.

[70] Cusanus, *On Being a Son of God*, I.64, p. 166. Compare *Opera*, vol. 1, fol. 66r (quoted in n. 68 above).

[71] This «mirror-of-truth», as Cusanus explains further below (*On Being a Son of God*, III.67, p. 167), is Christ, through whom every intellectual mirror (i.e., every human soul) obtains adoptive sonship.

> alive and intellectual and free, conceive them to be of such kind that they can curve themselves, straighten themselves, and clean themselves. I say, then: One [and the same] reflected-brightness appears variously in all mirror-reflections. But in the first, most straight Reflected-brightness all the other mirrors appear as they are. […] But in each of the other mirrors, which are contracted and curved, all the other mirrors appear not as they themselves are but in accordance with the condition of the receiving mirror, i.e., with some diminishment because of the receiving mirror's deviation from straightness. […] that [intellectual,] living mirror (as it were, a living eye)—upon receiving the first Mirror's reflected light—in [one and] the same moment of eternity beholds (in that same Mirror-of-truth) itself as it is and beholds (within itself) all the mirrors in its own [conditioning] manner. For the more simple and less contracted and more bright, clean, straight, just, and true [the intellectual mirror] is, the more clearly, joyously, and truly it will behold within itself God's glory and all mirrors.[72]

The undeniable similarity between this passage and Bodin's mirror analogy in the *Paradoxon* is even more striking in light of the relative rarity of comparable examples: while the imagery of mirrors and specularity is of course extensive in Western literature and philosophy,[73] I have not encountered many cases in which the ordinary human soul (or intellect) is presented as a mirror reflecting God's light with varying degrees of brightness.[74] The context in which the image occurs is also remarkably similar in Bodin and Cusanus: in both cases it appears within a larger discussion of questions of *deificatio* and *visio beatifica*; in both cases it is introduced to explain how an experience of God is possible for the creature despite God's radical alterity and transcendence; in both cases it serves the purpose of preserving an ontological distinction between God and man (as Bodin points out, the mirror reflects the object but does not contain it), thus avoiding the danger of presenting the mystical union between the two as an actual merging of substances. Cusanus's influence on Bodin has never been systematically studied, but we do know that Bodin read and appreciated the cardinal's works; the *Paradoxon* itself contains a marginal reference to *De docta ignorantia*, another text included in the first volume of the Lefèvre 1514 edition of Cusanus's *Opera omnia* which also contains *De filiatione Dei*; and it has been suggested that Bodin's great dialogue on religious tolerance, the *Colloquium*

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[72] Cusanus, *On Being a Son of God*, III.65-67, pp. 166-167. Compare *Opera*, vol. 1, fol. 66v: «formas aequales in rectis speculis minores in curvis apparere. Sit igitur altissima resplendentia principii nostri dei gloriosi in qua appareat deus ipse: quae sit veritatis speculum sine macula rectissimum atque interminum perfectissimumque. Sintque omnes creaturae specula contractiora et differenter curva: inter quae intellectuales naturae sint viva clariora atque rectiora specula. Ac talia cum sint viva et intellectualia atque libera: concipito quod possint seipsa incurvare, rectificare et mundare. Dico igitur. Claritas una specularis varie in istis universis resplendet specularibus reflexionibus et in prima rectissima speculari claritate omnia specula uti sunt resplendent […]. In omnibus autem aliis contractis et curvis omnia non uti ipsa sunt apparent: sed secundum recipientis speculi conditionem. Scilicet cum diminutione: ob recessum recipientis speculi a rectitudine. […] vivum illud speculum quasi oculus vivus cum receptione luminis resplendentiae primi speculi in eodem veritatis speculo se uti est intuetur: et in se omnia suo quidem modo. Quanto enim simplicius absolutius clarius mundius rectius iustius et verius fuerit: tanto in se gloriam dei atque omnia limpidius iocundius veriusque intuebitur».

[73] Andrea Tagliapietra, *La metafora dello specchio. Lineamenti per una storia simbolica* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2008).

[74] Maurice Scève's *Délie* 229 would be a comparable example, as long as we accept Michael J. Giordano's religious interpretation of Scève's love poetry (*The Art of Meditation and the French Renaissance Love Lyric: The Poetics of Introspection in Maurice Scève's* Délie, object de plus haulte vertu *(1544)* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), p. 312). The image of the human soul as a mirror of God is also present in Guillaume du Vair's *Saincte philosophie* (composed c. 1585 and first printed in 1588, thus chronologically very close to the *Paradoxon*), but in this case it refers not to any human soul but specifically to Adam's soul before the Fall: it thus points to the prelapsarian likeness of man to God, in contrast with his postlapsarian state of sin and corruption. Outside of France, the image is attested in Sperone Speroni's *Dialogo della vita attiva e contemplativa*, which however could not have been known to Bodin: probably composed in the 1530s, it was not published until 1596 and was thus excluded from Claude Gruget's 1551 translation of Speroni's dialogues into French. In Speroni as in Du Vair, the mirror analogy refers specifically to Adam's likeness to God before the Fall. I am grateful to Alessio Cotugno and David Lines for bringing Speroni's case to my attention.

Heptaplomeres, may have been inspired by Cusanus's *De pace fidei*.[75] In sum, there is strong evidence that Cusanus may indeed have been Bodin's primary source for his mirror analogy in the *Paradoxon*.

Further digging would likely uncover an even deeper network of relationships between Bodin and Cusanus's own sources: not only Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius, whose presence (whether positive or polemical) in Bodin is known to be pervasive;[76] but also Augustine, whose ill-defined mysticism has been at the centre of much recent scholarly debate,[77] and whose influence on Bodin still warrants further study; and, finally, the late medieval mystical tradition best embodied by Meister Eckhart, an author who deeply shaped Cusanus's theology and who also had an important afterlife in early modern France.[78] Passive receptivity was a central tenet of Eckhart's mysticism (as of mysticism in general), and his idea that «our blessedness does not lie in our active doing, rather in our passive reception of God» clearly resonates with Bodin's own position in the *Paradoxon*.[79] Furthermore, the mystical notion of a *triplex via* that leads to union with God through purification and illumination is central for understanding Bodin's idea that, while reflection is a free effusion of God's light and thus happens strictly by God's initiative, man can prepare for it by cleansing his spirit and turning his purified soul towards God in loving prayer.[80]

But this is food for further thought. What I hope to have shown in this article is, first, that Bodin introduced his theory of reflection as a corrective to Aristotle's idea of happiness as contemplation (that is, as «activity of the soul») and thus as a solution to a number of conceptual contradictions from which Bodin himself had not been able to extricate himself fully in previous works; second, that this theory has a double origin, scholastic on the one hand, mystical on the other. While Bodin's language of *actus reflexus* comes straight from late scholastic debates about happiness and the vision of God, and particularly from his early reading of the Carmelite theologian John Baconthorpe, he then subjected this language to a complete semantic overhaul, reinterpreting it in light of Cusanus's mirror analogy so as to emphasize the mystical notion of happiness as passive receptivity to God's light as opposed to the (fundamentally Aristotelian) idea of happiness as something that consisted in, or could be

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[75] See Cesare Vasoli, "De Nicolas de Kues et Jean Pic de la Mirandole à Jean Bodin: trois colloques", in *Jean Bodin. Actes du colloque interdisciplinare d'Angers, 24-27 mai 1984*, vol. 1, ed. Georges Cesbron (Angers: Presses universitaires d'Angers, 1985), pp. 253-275. Hartmut Bobzin has also identified a quotation from Cusanus's *Cribratio Alcorani* in Bodin's *Colloquium Heptaplomeres*: "Islamkundliche Quellen in Jean Bodins *Heptaplomeres*", in *Jean Bodins Colloquium Heptaplomeres*, ed. Günther Gawlick and Friedrich Niewöhner (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996), pp. 41-57.

[76] See Lloyd, *Jean Bodin*, *passim* (but esp. p. 260) for numerous examples. Pierre Mesnard, Cesare Vasoli, and Elisabetta Scapparone, among others, have studied the presence of Neoplatonic influences in Bodin.

[77] See the essays collected in *Augustine: Mystic and Mystagogue*, and particularly the very helpful review essay by Gerald Bonner, "Augustin and Mysticism", pp. 113-157.

[78] Jean-Marie Gueullette, *Eckhart en France: La lecture des* Institutions Spirituelles *attribuées à Tauler, 1548-1699*, Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 2012. Eckhart's influence on Cusanus has been widely studied (for a recent overview, see Elizabeth Brient, "Meister Eckhart's Influence on Nicholas of Cusa: A Survey of the Literature", in *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*, ed. Jeremiah M. Hackett (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), pp. 553-585). It is also worth recalling that Léfèvre d'Etaples, in addition to editing the works of Cusanus and Pseudo-Dionysius (as well as various works of Aristotle and the *Hermetica*), was also responsible for the first printed edition (Paris 1513) of the mystical works of Hildegard of Bingen and other medieval German female mystics. On this, and on early modern French mysticism in general, see Yelena Masur-Matusevich, *Le siècle d'or de la mystique française. De Jean Gerson à Jacques Léfèvre d'Etaples* (Milan: Archè, 2004).

[79] German sermon 24, "Ubi est qui natus est rex Judaeorum? (*Matt.* 2:2)", in Meister Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, trans. Oliver Davies (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), p. 215.

[80] On this point, see especially Rose, *Bodin and the Great God of Nature*; Rose however ties Bodin's idea of spiritual preparation too narrowly to the "Judaizing" tradition of Philo of Alexandria, while I argue that a number of other traditions (including various forms of Christian mysticism) may have weighed equally if not more strongly on him. For the *triplex via*, see Giordano, *The Art of Meditation*.

reached through, intellectual activity. Bodin's discussion of reflection thus represents a typical example of his eclectic handling of sources, but it also reveals his (thus far largely unsuspected) debts to specific authors (Baconthorpe, Cusanus) or intellectual traditions (Christian mysticism). Finally, and more importantly, studying the genesis of Bodin's theory of reflection has allowed us to see how he went about confronting a challenging philosophical problem that in his opinion had not yet found a satisfactory solution. Bodin explored a range of existing answers, put each of them to the test, settled for temporary solutions when pressed to publish, but never failed to reopen the dossier in subsequent works, making his way through conceptual inconsistencies and lexical inaccuracies to arrive at (what appeared to him as) a convincing conclusion.[81] In this sense, the case of action and contemplation is not dissimilar from that of sovereignty, which also occupied Bodin for a considerable part of his career and led him from time to time to spectacular volte-faces that have recently found a new meaning by means of genetic analysis.[82] Here as well, reopening Bodin's laboratory has proven an exciting way to see the philosopher at work.

[81] Of course, we have no means of knowing that Bodin – had he lived longer – would not have changed his mind about his theory of reflection just as he had previously changed his mind about his theory of contemplation. However, in the *Paradoxon* he expresses the strong conviction that his theory of reflection solves long-standing difficulties in which he himself had previously remained involved. Given that these difficulties had been the motor of his continuing preoccupation with the question of action and contemplation, it seems that he would have had no reason to reconsider the question afterwards. He displayed very similar behaviour with regard to his definition of sovereignty, which he first attempted in a series of (now lost) short treatises from the late 1550s; made public in the *Methodus* of 1566; substantially revised in the *Methodus* of 1572; and completely overturned in the *République* of 1576. After 1576, even though he often went back to the *République* (both in French and, after 1586, in Latin) to modify the text in fundamental ways, he never modified the definition of sovereignty again, evidently because he was satisfied with the solution found in 1576.

[82] See my "Introduction" in Bodin, *Methodus*, pp. 31-47; see also my article "Meaning in a Changing Context: Towards an Interdisciplinary Approach to Authorial Revision", *History of European Ideas* 40/4 (2014): 474-494.