



A MEDIEVAL QUEST FOR TRANSCENDENTAL EPISTEMOLOGY: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE DIETRICH OF FREIBERG'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

Selman DİLEK^a

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Abstract

This article examines Dietrich of Freiberg's theory of knowledge within the broader framework of medieval scholastic metaphysics and epistemology. It argues that Dietrich articulates a distinctive epistemological position that reconfigures central assumptions of Aristotelian realism by conceiving the intellect not as a merely passive recipient of forms, but as an active and constitutive principle. Drawing primarily on *De intellectu et intelligibili*, the study shows that Dietrich develops a dynamic account of intellection in which the intellect functions as both the ground of conceptual being (*ens conceptionale*) and the locus of quidditative constitution. The article situates Dietrich's epistemology within its intellectual sources, engaging his Aristotelian and Augustinian inheritances while also highlighting structural affinities with Avicenna's theory of the active intellect. At the same time, it explores the broader philosophical significance of Dietrich's position through a cautious comparison with themes later articulated in Kant's transcendental philosophy, particularly as interpreted in the work of Kurt Flasch. Special attention is given to Dietrich's insistence on the methodological autonomy of philosophy vis-à-vis theology and to his critical engagement with Thomas Aquinas. Finally, the article considers the reception and transformation of Dietrich's epistemological insights within Dominican speculative mysticism, with particular reference to Meister Eckhart. The study concludes by presenting Dietrich's theory of knowledge as a distinctive moment of speculative innovation within medieval philosophy that anticipates key concerns of later modern thought without collapsing historical or conceptual boundaries.

Keywords: Dietrich of Freiberg, Epistemology, Ens conceptionale, Constitutive Intellect, Transcendental Philosophy.

^a Dr. İbn Haldun University, Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, Department of Philosophy. İstanbul/Türkiye.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9656-8324> **e-mail:** selman.dilek@ihu.edu.tr

1. Introduction

The intellectual landscape of the Latin Middle Ages was characterized by a sophisticated synthesis of classical philosophy, Christian theology, and emerging scientific inquiry. Within the institutional frameworks of cathedral schools and universities, medieval Christian thinkers developed comprehensive systems of metaphysics, epistemology, and logic-drawing significantly on Aristotelian and Neoplatonic sources, often mediated by Arabic and Jewish traditions. A central concern of this intellectual project was the systematic engagement between reason and revelation, where philosophy and theology were treated as distinct yet interrelated modes of inquiry. While towering figures such as Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Albertus Magnus came to define the main currents of scholastic thought, the period also witnessed the work of lesser-known but intellectually significant figures whose contributions, though long overlooked, have gained increasing scholarly interest in recent decades. Among these stands Dietrich of Freiberg (*Theodoricus Teutonicus de Vriberch*), a Dominican philosopher and theologian whose speculative reflections on metaphysics, intellect, and the foundations of knowledge distinguish him as one of the original thinkers of the late thirteenth century.

Dietrich of Freiberg was born in the town of Freiberg sometime between 1240 and 1250, although the exact date remains uncertain. He entered the Dominican Order at a young age and received his initial education within the order's studia, where he became acquainted with the natural philosophy of Aristotle, as well as foundational texts in physics and astronomy. His intellectual development was shaped by this rigorous scholastic training, which likely led him to study at the General Studium in Cologne, founded by Albertus Magnus. Between 1270 and 1274, he pursued theological studies at the University of Paris, a period during which he engaged directly with the vibrant intellectual milieu of one of the most important centers of medieval learning (Sturlese, 1984, pp. 22-26). Following his return from Paris, Dietrich of Freiberg took on a number of academic and institutional roles. In 1280, he was appointed as a lector at the Dominican schools in Trier. Around 1286, he began composing his major philosophical treatises, and in 1293, he was elected provincial of the Dominican Order in Germany. During his term as provincial, one of his assistants was Meister Eckhart, who would later become one of the central figures in the development of German mystical theology. Dietrich's appointment as a theology professor in Paris in 1296 testifies to both his scholarly stature and his prestige within the Dominican Order. In 1304, he attended the General Chapter of the Dominican Order in Toulouse together with Eckhart, and following Eckhart's removal from office in 1310, Dietrich played a central role in overseeing the election process for his successor

(Flasch, 2007, pp. 30–36). Although the precise date of his death is unknown, the last documented records of his activities date to 1317, and it is therefore presumed that he died sometime between 1318 and 1320. Dietrich's intellectual legacy has largely survived through manuscript transmission. Eighteen manuscripts containing his works are known today, the most extensive of which is preserved in the Vatican Library under the shelfmark Latinus 2183.¹

Dietrich of Freiberg's intellectual output spans a broad spectrum of disciplines, reflecting both his rigorous philosophical training and his scientific curiosity. His surviving works include treatises on metaphysics, epistemology, cosmology, psychology, and optics, many of which display a sophisticated engagement with Aristotelian thought while also advancing original positions that go beyond the confines of traditional scholasticism. In addition to his contributions to systematic philosophy, Dietrich was also a pioneer of medieval experimental science. His treatise *De iride* ("On the Rainbow") is a particularly notable example of this dimension of his thought (Lindberg, 1976, pp. 90–94). His analysis includes detailed discussions of the refraction and reflection of light, as well as calculations concerning the position of the observer. This work positions Dietrich not merely as a metaphysician but as one of the natural philosophers who sought to reconcile empirical science with theoretical speculation.

His writings in the fields of metaphysics and epistemology are especially significant for understanding his philosophical originality. In his treatise *De intellectu et intelligibili* ("On the Intellect and the Intelligible"), Dietrich explicitly rejects the notion of the intellect as a passive recipient and instead posits it as the constitutive principle of knowledge. He thus departs from the Aristotelian-Thomistic model of cognition, in which knowledge results from the reception of intelligible species derived from sense perception. For Dietrich, by contrast, knowledge is not merely the representation of external objects but is rooted in the intellect's active, formative engagement with reality. This epistemological framework has led some modern scholars to identify Dietrich as a historical forerunner of Kantian transcendentalism, insofar as he emphasizes the mind's role in constituting the conditions of possible experience (For the interpretation linking Dietrich to Kant, see Flasch, 1972).

Among Dietrich of Freiberg's significant philosophical contributions is his treatise *De accidentibus*, in which he engages critically with the metaphysical implications of the Christian doctrine of transubstantiation. At the center of this

¹ The most comprehensive collection of Dietrich's works is preserved in Codex Vaticanus Latinus 2183, held in the Vatican Library, which contains 22 treatises. For a detailed information, see also ebd., pp. 28–30.

inquiry lies the question of whether accidents (i.e., non-substantial properties) can exist without an underlying substance. While Thomas Aquinas had attempted to explain the Eucharistic transformation by invoking the real distinction between *substantia* and *accidentia*, Dietrich challenges this view on logical and metaphysical grounds. He asserts that, in accordance with the principle of non-contradiction -even in the context of divine omnipotence- accidents cannot exist ontologically without a subject or bearer (*subiectum*). To posit otherwise, he argues, would undermine the internal coherence of philosophical reasoning itself (Mojsisch, 2006). This position underscores Dietrich's insistence on preserving the autonomy of philosophical inquiry and delineating its boundaries from the theological domain.

Dietrich's mature philosophical period begins with the composition of *De origine rerum praedicamentaliū* (c. 1286), a foundational work that addresses the ontological status of categorially defined entities (*res praedicamentales*) and attempts to ground their intelligibility in the constitutive activity of the intellect. Here, Dietrich posits that certain modes of being arise not from extramental realities but from the intellect's operation itself, marking a departure from Aristotelian essentialism and Thomistic realism. In response to criticisms provoked by this work- particularly from the Dominican scholastic milieu- he authored further treatises such as *De visione beatifica*, *De quidditatibus entium*, and *De ente et essentia*. In these texts, Dietrich articulates a critique of Thomas Aquinas and his followers, especially concerning questions of epistemological justification, the structure of divine and human knowledge, and the proper methodology of theological discourse. His views represent a marked departure from mainstream scholasticism, challenging prevailing assumptions about the nature of intellectual cognition, the ontological basis of divine ideas, and the theological use of Aristotelian categories (On *De origine rerum praedicamentaliū* and its philosophical impact, see Freiberg, 1986).

Although Dietrich of Freiberg advocated positions that bear notable resemblance to some of the theses condemned in the Paris Condemnations of 1277, he himself was never accused of heresy. This is particularly striking given the evolving doctrinal rigidity within the Dominican Order: in 1279, the Order explicitly prohibited critiques of Thomas Aquinas, and by 1286 Thomism had effectively become the *doctrina communis*, the officially sanctioned theological framework of the Dominican schools (Aertsen, 1996, pp. 71–75). Dietrich, however, openly contested this institutional orthodoxy, arguing that the authority of the *communiter loquentes* (those who speak in common) should not be grounded in mere consensus or majority opinion, but rather in the rigorous demonstration and philosophical competence of its advocates (For a detailed discussion of

Dietrich's critique of institutionalized Thomism, see Flasch, 1986, pp. 37-45). Dietrich's theory of knowledge, though rooted in the conceptual frameworks of medieval scholasticism, introduces elements that have been interpreted as precursors to certain modern epistemological debates. His emphasis on the constitutive role of the intellect in the formation of intelligible structures suggests a model of cognition that anticipates aspects of transcendental philosophy. This article centers on Dietrich's epistemological project, beginning with an analysis of his ontology and conception of unity, proceeding to his theory of intellect and cognition, and culminating in a discussion of his account of the relationship between philosophy and theology. The final sections will examine his divergence from Thomas Aquinas and assess the historical significance of Kurt Flasch's interpretation of Dietrich as a forerunner of transcendental idealism.

2. Ontological Foundations and Conceptual Framework

Dietrich of Freiberg's ontology represents both a critical engagement with and a systematic reconstruction of the foundational questions of medieval scholastic metaphysics. His conception of being draws on multiple traditions: Aristotelian category theory, Neoplatonic metaphysics of emanation, and the Augustinian notion of ontological interiority. Within this framework, being (*ens*) is not merely a phenomenon externally separated from God and instantiated through creation *ex nihilo*. Rather, it is a reality intrinsically intelligible and structurally unified - accessible to and partially constituted by the activity of the intellect.

A proper understanding of Dietrich's metaphysics must begin with his interpretation of the Aristotelian doctrine of categories. For Dietrich, the ten categories (*praedicamenta*) are not ontologically self-standing features of things; they do not exist as independent structures in *re*. Rather, they are conceptual determinations produced by the intellect in its engagement with reality. These *res praedicamentales* are, therefore, not intrinsic attributes of natural objects but expressions of the mind's capacity to organize and articulate the intelligibility of the world (Freiberg, 1986, p. 301). In this respect, Dietrich's distinction between *ens reale* and *ens conceptionale* parallels Avicenna's differentiation between the ontological mode (*wujūd fī nafsīhi*) and the conceptual mode (*wujūd fī al-‘aql*) of existence. However, it is difficult to claim that Dietrich explicitly adopted Avicenna's modal metaphysical framework, as his approach emerged from a distinct Latin Scholastic context (Gutas, 2001, pp. 237-243).

This distinction leads Dietrich to articulate a twofold understanding of being: *ens reale* and *ens conceptionale*. The former refers to entities existing in the external world according to the principles of nature; the latter denotes the conceptual contents produced and structured by the intellect. What is remarkable in

Dietrich's account is that *ens conceptionale* is not reducible to mere mental representation. It is, rather, the active configuration of meaning (*significatio*) through which the intellect not only mirrors but also *constitutes* the essence of what is known (Mojsisch, 2008, pp. 142-155).

In this way, Dietrich moves beyond the epistemological realism of Thomas Aquinas, according to whom concepts are abstracted from the real forms embedded in material substances. While Thomas conceives the intellect primarily as a receiver that abstracts universal forms from sense data, Dietrich assigns the intellect a generative, even ontological role: it is through the intellect that the *whatness* of a thing -the *quid*-comes to be constituted. This thesis is developed most extensively in his *De intellectu et intelligibili*, where he writes that the essence of a thing is "formed in the intellect as if the intellect were its productive cause" (Freiberg, 1990, p. 17).

In Dietrich of Freiberg's ontology, *quidditas* -the "whatness" of a thing- emerges not as a passive essence residing in the object but as a structure actively constituted by the intellect. Influenced by Avicenna's metaphysics, Dietrich adopts the term yet reconfigures its meaning: the intellect does not merely grasp essences but plays a formative role in their ontological articulation. Thus, *quidditas* is not just cognitively apprehended; it is *produced* through intellectual activity. This position entails a re-evaluation of Aristotle's four causes. For Dietrich, only *formal* and *material* causes pertain to being; efficient and final causes belong to physical explanation and are excluded from metaphysical structure. This shift emphasizes the intrinsic, intelligible constitution of beings over their external origins or purposes. Although Dietrich's view resonates with Avicenna's distinction between *essence* (*māhiyya*) and *existence* (*wujūd*), he places greater weight on the active role of the human intellect in shaping conceptual being (*ens conceptionale*). In this way, cognition becomes not merely receptive but constitutive - a decisive step toward a metaphysics of intellection that anticipates later epistemological debates.²

Dietrich's account stands in sharp contrast to the classical scholastic realism of Thomas Aquinas, who held that concepts are abstracted from real structures in nature. For Aquinas, the intellect is receptive: it passively derives universals from the empirical world. Dietrich, however, draws on Augustinian principles -

² Dietrich distinguishes between *ens reale secundum naturam* and *ens conceptionale seu cognitivum*, drawing upon Averroes while formulating his own theory of conceptual being. While his terminology resonates with Avicenna's distinction between *māhiyya* and *wujūd*, Dietrich advances a more distinctly epistemological account: *quidditas* is not merely grasped by the intellect but actively constituted through its cognitive operations. Flasch, (1972, pp. 172-177).

especially the maxim "*corpora non tangunt animam*" ("bodily things do not affect the soul")- to argue that the intellect is not shaped by external objects but generates concepts according to its own internal laws (Flasch, 1972, pp. 90–96). This position leads Dietrich to coin the term *quidifizieren* ("to quidditize"), describing the act by which the intellect actively constitutes the *quidditas* or whatness of a thing (Flasch, 2007, pp. 92–95).³ For Dietrich, the *quidditas* is not merely a formal descriptor but a condition of existence itself. Hence, he introduces the concept of *esse quiditativum* - a mode of being that is inseparable from a determined essence. To exist as something is to exist through a specific *whatness*. A human being, for example, does not merely exist; he exists as a *rational animal*, a definition that constitutes the ontological ground of his being. In this view, *quidditas* is not a derivative abstraction but a generative principle, and the intellect serves as both epistemic and ontological ground.

Within Dietrich's ontology, the concepts of *ens reale* and *ens conceptionale* express two intertwined and mutually determinative forms of being. *Ens conceptionale* is more than just a mental representation of reality; it is the cognitive act itself - the constitutive activity of the intellect that forms concepts. Dietrich's conception of the intellect thus resembles the Platonic idea of the soul as a "birth-giving" principle of knowledge: cognitive activity is akin to birth, a generative process through which the object comes into mental being. Moreover, in Dietrich's system, conceptual being is not restricted to the human intellect's internal operations; it is also intrinsic to the ontological structure of the cosmos. The term *ens conceptionale* articulates the idea that all beings exist first as intelligible structures within the divine intellect. In this framework, not only the human mind but also the divine intellect (*intellectus divinus*) possesses a constitutive, formative power. Thus, *emanatio* - the process by which being flows from God- can be understood in cosmological and metaphysical terms as an order of intelligibility. The emanation of intellects, souls, and finally material substances unfolds through a hierarchical chain of being, ordered by degrees of intelligibility and actuality. Importantly, this process is not temporal or spatial, but a necessary ontological structure. Dietrich's doctrine of *emanatio* thus bears clear affinities with the metaphysical systems of Late Antique Neoplatonists such as Plotinus and Proclus.⁴

³ Flasch uses this term to underline Dietrich's departure from Aristotelian abstractionism and his alignment with an Augustinian conception of the intellect as formative rather than merely receptive.

⁴ On the influence of Neoplatonic emanationism in Dietrich's thought, see Flasch, (2007, pp. 53-65).

Another central concept in Dietrich's metaphysical framework is *universitas entium*, or "the totality of beings." Unlike the more commonly used scholastic term *universum*, which typically denotes the sum of all created entities distinct from God, *universitas entium* encompasses all levels of being -including divine, intellectual, and material realities- within a unified ontological continuum. Dietrich deliberately distinguishes his usage of this term from the prevailing tradition in order to articulate a metaphysical vision of reality that resists strict dualistic separations between Creator and creation. Instead, he proposes a model that affirms the ontological interconnection and gradational continuity among all beings, culminating in the divine source. Through the notion of *universitas entium*, Dietrich advances a vision of metaphysical unity that emphasizes the coherence of multiplicity within the order of being. The fundamental claim of his ontology is that being manifests simultaneously as unity -in-multiplicity and multiplicity-in-unity (Dietrich von Freiberg, 1980, pp. 33-34).⁵ This principle holds on both cosmological and epistemological levels. Cosmologically, the universe unfolds as a structured hierarchy through the process of *emanatio*, whereby all things emanate from God in ordered degrees. Epistemologically, this multiplicity becomes intelligible only insofar as it is gathered into unity by the activity of the intellect. Thus, the intellect emerges not only as the foundation of knowledge but also as the constitutive ground of being itself. Dietrich's position, in this regard, challenges the dualism that sharply separates the divine from the created. Instead, he retrieves and transforms Neoplatonic notions of the *One (hen)*, to propose a metaphysics in which the unity of being is both grounded in and revealed through intellectual activity (On Dietrich's use of *universitas entium* in contrast to *universum* see Flasch, 2007, pp. 78-85).

Dietrich's metaphysical system culminates in a reinterpretation of what came to be known in the scholastic tradition as the *transcendental concepts-ens* (being), *unum* (one), *verum* (true), and *bonum* (good). These are not treated merely as abstract notions imposed by the mind upon reality, but as ontological co-determinants that are operative at every level of being. For Dietrich, all that exists is, by necessity, also in some sense one, true, and good. These properties are not merely attributed to beings by thought but are inseparable from the very structure of being itself (Aertsen, 1996, pp. 105-108). Thus, Dietrich's ontology transcends the boundaries of categorical classification to offer a unified vision that is simultaneously metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical. His metaphysics presents, on the one hand, a theory of cognition that foregrounds the

⁵ "Universitas entium quantum ad ordinis sui dispositionem distinguitur in suprema, media et infima... ut in quolibet dictorum trium inveniuntur superiora, media et inferiora."

creative function of the intellect through the concept of *ens conceptionale*, and on the other hand, a theory of being that stresses the structural unity of all beings via the idea of *universitas entium*. Taken together, these aspects constitute a distinct philosophical position that critiques the objectivist realism of classical scholasticism, particularly in its Thomistic formulations, and anticipates key concerns of modern epistemology in a structurally significant way.

3. Epistemological Premises and the Light of the Intellect

A central element of Dietrich of Freiberg's philosophical project is the theory of knowledge, which is intimately tied to his understanding of the intellect. For Dietrich, the intellect is not merely a faculty for receiving representations of external objects, but a formative principle that plays an active and constitutive role in both being and knowing. His epistemology departs sharply from classical representational models by insisting that the intellect is not a passive mirror of reality, but an agent that shapes and structures the very intelligibility of what is known. Dietrich's theory of the intellect is most systematically developed in his treatise *De intellectu et intelligibili*. In this work, he argues that the intellect is not simply a medium for reflecting external realities, but rather the active source that constitutes quiddities and determines the very object of knowledge: "*for the intellect contains within itself what it apprehends, precisely as that which is constituted by its own act of cognition.*" (Dietrich von Freiberg, 1989, p. 28). The intellect plays a generative role in articulating the formal content of what is known, beyond the comprehension of that which exists outside itself. This view represents a critical departure from Thomas Aquinas's empirically grounded theory of cognition. For Aquinas, knowledge is generated through the abstraction of species from sense data, and the intellect functions primarily as a passive receiver in this process. Dietrich, by contrast, asserts that the intellect is the origin of conceptual form: it does not simply recognize, but produces and determines species and essences (Mojsisch, 2008, pp. 142–155).

This position is closely linked to Dietrich's reinterpretation of Aristotle's concept of the *intellectus agens* the active intellect. In Dietrich's system, the active intellect becomes a creative and ontological principle rather than merely a functional faculty of cognition. It is understood as a pure, immaterial substance that emanates from God (*emanatio intellectualis*), and precisely because it is unencumbered by matter, it is capable of encompassing all being. The human intellect, created *in imago Dei*, is seen as a reflection of this divine intellect. As such, it does not merely mediate knowledge, but actively participates in the constitution of the *quidditas* -the "whatness" or essential nature- of certain beings. In this way, the intellect assumes both an epistemological function and a

constitutive ontological role: “*That the intellect, as intellect, is the likeness of all being [...]*” (Dietrich von Freiberg, 1989, p. XIX).⁶ This elevated status of the intellect is also grounded in Dietrich’s notion of intrinsic causality (*causa intrinseca*). The intellect is more than just an organon, an impartial instrument of the mind; it is an intrinsic principle that constitutes the very essence of the soul. This idea resonates strongly with Augustine’s doctrine of *lux interior* -the inner light- according to which cognition is not derived from external objects, but from the illuminating power inherent in the mind itself. In line with this, Augustine’s well-known dictum becomes a guiding maxim for Dietrich’s epistemology: *Non potest corpus mentem ferire* the corporeal cannot strike the mind. Thus, in Dietrich’s view, the source of knowledge is not located in the external world, but in the inherent structure and activity of the intellect.

This understanding represents a clear departure from the Aristotelian model of knowledge. For Aristotle, knowledge arises when the intellect abstracts universal forms from sensory images. Thomistic epistemology builds upon this, portraying the intellect as a passive recipient that comes to know through representations derived from the senses. Dietrich explicitly rejects this view: knowledge, he argues, does not arise from the senses but from the inherent activity of the intellect. Thus, the fundamental condition for the possibility of knowledge is what he calls the *ratio universalis* the universal measure and proportion of reason. It refers to the universal law that underlies all cognitive activity. Even though the intellect encounters individual beings, it can grasp their essence only by means of a universal structure (Dietrich von Freiberg, 1989, pp. XXVI-XXX). This approach elevates Dietrich’s epistemology beyond a rationalist framework to a quasi-transcendental level. For knowledge now entails not only a directedness toward the object, but also a reflexive act of the intellect contemplating its own conditions of knowing.

In this context, Dietrich establishes the foundation of knowledge not *a posteriori* but *a priori*. Sensory experience functions merely as a stimulus for cognition; what truly grounds knowledge is the immanent order of the intellect. Thus, knowledge is not the accumulation of empirical observations, but the grasp of necessary and universal principles.⁷ Building on this *a priori* foundation, Dietrich introduces the concept of *ens conceptionale*, which plays a pivotal role in his theory of knowledge and being. This term designates beings constituted mentally

⁶ “*Daß der Intellekt als Intellekt die Ähnlichkeit des ganzen Seienden ist [...]*”, see Mojsisch, (2008, pp. 162-174).

⁷ Mojsisch emphasizes the *a priori* structure of cognition in Dietrich’s thought. Mojsisch, (2008, pp. 147-149).

(*entia conceptionalia*) and serves to articulate the ontological distinction between the contents of thought and natural entities. These mental beings do not originate in the natural world, but are the product of the intellect's formative activity; they are characterized by necessary structures, not empirical foundations.⁸ Through this conceptual framework, Dietrich draws a clear ontological boundary between *entia naturae* (natural beings) and *entia rationis* (beings of reason).

3.1. Intellectus Agens

One of the most fundamental distinctions at the heart of Dietrich of Freiberg's epistemology is that between the *intellectus agens* (active intellect) and the *intellectus possibilis* (possible or passive intellect). This conceptual bifurcation structures his theory of knowledge and also reveals the ontological implications of cognition, positioning epistemology as a mode of metaphysical inquiry. For Dietrich, active intellect is the principle of knowledge-production, as well as a constitutive and creative power inherent in the structure of the human soul and the intelligible cosmos.

The *intellectus agens*, in Dietrich's account, is *actus purus* -pure actuality- and therefore entirely immaterial and incorporeal. It corresponds structurally to the divine intellect from which all being emanates. Within this framework of *emanatio* (emanation) and *reditus* (return), Dietrich incorporates the active intellect into the broader metaphysical schema of cosmic procession. The creative character of the human intellect, modelled on divine noetic activity, implies that human cognition is not merely receptive but fundamentally generative: it produces concepts, imposes intelligible structure, and participates in the ontological ordering of reality. As such, cognition for Dietrich is not only *gnoseological* but also *ontological* in nature (Dietrich von Freiberg, 1999, pp. 3-6).

By contrast, the *intellectus possibilis* -the possible intellect- is pure potentiality (*potentia pura*). It is the capacity for cognition that becomes actualized only through the formative activity of the active intellect. Unlike Thomas Aquinas, who viewed the possible intellect as a stable power within the soul, Dietrich argues that it lacks ontological determinacy until it is unified with the concept. In this sense, the possible intellect is not a passive organ awaiting impressions, but a dynamically constituted faculty that only becomes real in the act of intellectual

⁸ "For apprehension as being as such, everything that exists in an intellectual manner belongs to it not merely with respect to the apprehended thing insofar as it is apprehended or known, but rather with respect to the very act of knowing or apprehending itself, which for that very reason is, in terms of apprehension, being". Dietrich von Freiberg, (1995, pp. 227). On the notion of *ens conceptionale* and its role in Dietrich's epistemology and ontology, see Dietrich von Freiberg, (1963).

assimilation. It is only through the actualizing presence of the concept (*quiditas*) that the possible intellect achieves determination and actuality (Mojsisch, 1984, pp. 203-210).

This reconfiguration marks a decisive departure from the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition, in which the possible intellect receives forms abstracted from sensory experience. Dietrich instead aligns himself more closely with Augustinian and Neoplatonic views, where the intellect's formative role is emphasized, and the external world does not causally impress itself upon the soul. Rather, knowledge arises from the internal, illuminative power of the intellect, modeled on the divine source.

3.2. *Ens conceptionale*

Within Dietrich of Freiberg's philosophical system, the concept of *ens conceptionale* plays a pivotal role in articulating the structural bond between knowledge and being. Concepts (*conceptiones*) are not passive images abstracted from external reality. Rather, they are necessary forms constituted according to the intrinsic laws of the intellect. These forms do not correspond directly to entities in nature, but exist as indispensable elements of the mind's cognitive order. In this context, *ens conceptionale* denotes not merely the contents of thought, but also the active and foundational structures through which knowledge itself is generated.⁹ Dietrich draws on the legacy of Averroes (*Ibn Rushd*) in distinguishing the conceptual realm from sensory data, but he transforms this epistemological distinction into an ontological doctrine (Flasch, 2006, pp. 89-111). While Averroes emphasized the separateness of the universal intellect from individual cognition, Dietrich internalizes the productive function of intellect, claiming that concepts gain ontological weight only insofar as they are actualized within the internal dynamism of the human mind. In other words, conceptual entities become real not because they reflect external things, but because they express the intellect's formal activity.

From this standpoint, knowledge is not to be understood as *representatio* the mirroring of an external object -but as *quidificatio*- the conceptual constitution of essence (Dietrich, 1999, pp. 7-10). The intellect's orientation toward an object is the constructive act by which the object's *quiditas* (whatness or essence) is

⁹ So says Dietrich: "*Quod autem supra dictum est, quod intellectus agens, qui est intellectus semper in actu per essentiam, sit aliquod ens conceptionale, hoc, inquam, fere secundum aequivocationem dictum est sumendo ens conceptionale valde communiter pro quocumque cognitivo seu cognito qualitercumque, secundum quod etiam entia separata, quae intelligentias vocant, si quae sunt, possunt dici secundum hoc entia conceptionalia, inquantum habent cognitionem intellectualem et se ipsas in sui cognitione concipiunt per indifferentiam essentiae concipientis et concepti.*" Dietrich von Freiberg, (1995, p. 258).

generated at the level of thought. To know, for Dietrich, is to produce a concept of “what something is.” Thus, knowledge cannot be reduced to a simple subject-object relation, since in the act of cognition, the object is constituted within the intellect itself. Dietrich grounds this view in the principle *intellectus sui ipsius est notitia* the intellect is the knowledge of itself. According to this principle, self-knowledge is the precondition for all other modes of knowing. The intellect must first recognize itself as a source of order, measure, and essence before it can grasp any object. This self-reflexive structure is what enables the generation of universally valid concepts.

3.3. Conscientia

In this context, Dietrich of Freiberg’s theory of knowledge represents a radical departure from classical epistemology based on representation. According to Thomas Aquinas, the process of cognition begins with the representation of the external world in the mind. Through sense perception, the human subject encounters objects, and these sensory impressions are subsequently processed by the intellect and transformed into concepts. In this model, the intellect functions as a passive processor of sensory input. Dietrich categorically rejects this representational model. For him, the process of knowledge does not proceed from the outside in -from sensory data to intellectual form- but rather from the inside out, as the intellect actively constitutes the essence (*quiditas*) of what is known. The intellect is not a passive intermediary but the original principle that gives form and meaning to being. In this way, epistemology in Dietrich’s thought assumes primacy over ontology: the structure of knowledge determines the structure of being.

“The necessity of such a relation to the origin of its knowledge is grounded, in the case of the intellect in general, in the fact that intellectual cognition possesses the following distinctive feature: through its act of knowing, it relates itself to the known thing, yet not simply or in a detached and immediate manner by which the substance of the thing would be known -as, for example, the substance of a human being, a horse, or a colour- but insofar as it knows things in their principles, that is, in the ground and concept of the thing. It is precisely in this respect that intellectual cognition differs from every other mode of knowing. For through perceptive and imaginative cognition, or through similar cognitive functions, the object is apprehended according to its substance, that is, as colour, sound, or circle. In an intellectual manner, however, all this is known only in its principles, for to know intellectually means to investigate inwardly, that is, to grasp a thing

from within, according to its ground and its concept" (Dietrich von Freiberg, 1995, p. 141).

This constructivist understanding of knowledge also informs Dietrich's conception of *conscientia* (consciousness). He distinguishes between two levels of consciousness. The first is empirical consciousness, which is grounded in sensory awareness and experience. The second is transempirical consciousness, which refers to the intellect's awareness of its own essence and activity. It is this second form of consciousness that constitutes the foundation of knowledge. Only through the intellect's self-reflexive awareness -its ability to know itself- does universal cognition become possible.¹⁰ Dietrich integrates Augustinian and Aristotelian traditions in his account of consciousness. He synthesizes Augustine's concept of the *abditum mentis* -the hidden depth of the soul- with Aristotle's notion of the *nous poietikos* (active intellect), forging a unique and original model of intellectual self-awareness (Dietrich, 1999, pp. 9-12; Winkler, 1997, pp. 195-198). In this model, consciousness is not simply the registration of external stimuli, but a dynamic, ontologically productive act of the intellect, capable of grounding both knowledge and being.

In conclusion, Dietrich of Freiberg's theory of knowledge does not merely describe the cognitive process but also provides a metaphysical framework that emphasizes the resemblance between the human intellect and the divine. The *intellectus agens*, akin to the creative *logos* of God, constitutes the *quidditas* of things at the level of essence; the *intellectus possibilis*, in turn, serves as the receptive ground where this creative activity unfolds. This dual structure reveals that knowledge, for Dietrich, is not only an epistemological operation but also an ontological act. The human intellect, created in the image of God, is endowed with the capacity to grasp universal truth not through the passive reception of external representations, but through the inner structure of reason itself. In this way, Dietrich's epistemology presents the intellect as capable of constructing and comprehending the necessary structures of being, thereby advancing a model in which knowledge and existence are fundamentally interwoven.

¹⁰ Dietrich von Freiberg's concept of *conscientia* (consciousness/awareness) draws inspiration from classical Augustinian introspection but deepens it by adapting it to his own ontological-epistemological system. This model of consciousness, based on Augustine's understanding of *abditum mentis* ('the inner depth of the soul'), encompasses not only sensory awareness but also the mind's knowledge of its own essence. This state of self-consciousness is based on the principle *intellectus sui ipsius est notitia* (the intellect is knowledge of itself) and is presented as the precondition for all universal knowledge. Thus, *conscientia* becomes not only a psychological phenomenon but also an ontological principle. In this respect, Dietrich's understanding of consciousness can be considered one of the precursors of modern transcendental theories of consciousness. Dietrich von Freiberg, (1995, pp. XXII-XXIV).

4. The Relation between Philosophy and Theology

In Dietrich of Freiberg's thought, the relationship between philosophy and theology is not merely a methodological distinction between two fields of knowledge, but reflects a deeper philosophical concern regarding the legitimacy and scope of epistemic inquiry. While theology relies on premises grounded in revelation, philosophy, for Dietrich, must rest upon the principles of reason alone. He draws a clear boundary between these domains, not in order to provoke conflict, but to ensure that each discipline functions coherently within the framework of its own rational structure and method. This perspective is shaped significantly by the influence of Albertus Magnus and is firmly rooted in the Aristotelian hierarchy of the sciences. In Dietrich's view, philosophy is a discipline governed by immanent rational principles and directed toward phenomena that are in principle accessible to human experience and reason. Theology, by contrast, is oriented toward divine realities that transcend empirical inquiry, and interprets them through revealed truths. Accordingly, philosophy investigates the causes of what is given in experience, whereas theology seeks to comprehend the meaning and purpose of that which pertains to God (Dietrich von Freiberg, 1989, p. XVII).

According to Dietrich of Freiberg, the most evident violation of the proper boundaries between philosophy and theology is found in the system of Thomas Aquinas. Dietrich is particularly critical of Aquinas's attempt to justify theological dogmas -such as the doctrine of transubstantiation- using the conceptual apparatus of Aristotelian philosophy. In doing so, Aquinas, he argues, compromises the internal coherence of philosophical reasoning. A central example of this is the proposition that "accidents can exist without a substance," which plays a key role in the theological explanation of the Eucharist.

For Dietrich, such a claim is philosophically untenable. In the Aristotelian framework, accidents are ontologically dependent on a substance; their existence without a substantial basis contradicts the very principles of the *categories* and violates the fundamental law of non-contradiction. The idea that God's omnipotence could override such metaphysical necessities leads, in Dietrich's eyes, to the dissolution of philosophy's rational integrity. Reason, he insists, cannot yield to theological authority without undermining its own foundational principles.¹¹

¹¹ "On the one hand, they support their claims with arguments drawn from nature and from the properties of reality; but when a stronger argument is required, they resort to a miracle, claiming that what they attempt to justify is brought about in a wondrous manner by a supernatural power..." Dietrich von Freiberg, (1994, p. XLIII). Cf. Mojsisch, (2000, pp. 68-78).

Dietrich's critique of Thomism thus highlights his insistence on the methodological autonomy of philosophy. In his view, philosophical knowledge must rest on rational inquiry alone; it cannot be grounded in appeals to authority or faith. This position has far-reaching implications not only for epistemology but also for the proper delimitation of metaphysical disciplines (Winkler, 1997, pp. 193-196). In his fragment *De subiecto theologiae*, Dietrich explicitly distinguishes the subject matters of philosophy and theology: philosophy investigates the universal principles of nature, while theology concerns itself with truths revealed by God (Dietrich von Freiberg, 1988). This clear demarcation is intended not to oppose theology per se, but to secure the internal legitimacy of each domain according to its own epistemological foundations.

Kurt Flasch interprets Dietrich's position as an early harbinger of a transcendental shift within medieval thought. According to Flasch, in his treatise *De origine rerum praedicamentarium*, Dietrich argues that concepts and categories are constituted by the intellect, thereby anticipating a position that bears structural resemblance to Kant's transcendental idealism: it is not the mind that conforms to the object, but rather the object that conforms to the mind, since the mind itself constructs it (Flasch, 1972, pp. 63-85; Mojsisch, 2000, pp. 69-71). However, this similarity must be approached with caution. Dietrich retains the metaphysical framework of Aristotelian thought, preserving key doctrines such as the theory of emanation, the hierarchy of being, and the classical relationship between God and the world. Whereas in Thomas Aquinas's theological system, the intellect often plays an explanatory or interpretive role subordinate to faith, in Dietrich's system, the intellect functions as an ontologically generative principle that actively shapes the very categories of being. This entails a deliberate refusal to allow faith-based dogma to encroach upon the domain of metaphysics. In this sense, Dietrich remains faithful to the immanent operations of reason and consistently prioritizes rational explanation over appeals to theological authority (Flasch, 1972, p. 182).

Dietrich's critique of Thomas Aquinas goes beyond abstract methodological debates and extends to fundamental philosophical doctrines such as the interpretation of *intellectus possibilis* (the possible intellect). Thomas viewed the possible intellect as a passive, receptive faculty - an interpretation that Dietrich explicitly rejects as "crude and reductive" (*rudis et rudimentaria*).¹² For Dietrich,

¹² Dietrich firmly rejects the claim that the beatific vision could be mediated by the *intellectus possibilis*, dismissing such a position as inherently flawed: "*Primum autem inconveniens, quod prima fronte in ingressu huius considerationis occurrit, est, quod illi, qui immediatam visionem Dei per essentiam dicunt fieri per intellectum possibilem, a directa et immediata visione Dei excludunt intellectum agentem quasi universaliter nihil intelligentem, cum tamen ipse sit id nobilius, quod Deus*

the intellect is not a mere receiver of forms but a creative, constitutive principle. The possible intellect is not merely a potentiality awaiting activation; it is an active participant in the process of cognition, and thus plays an essential role in constituting intelligible reality.

This position is not only epistemological but also ontological. The act of knowing, in Dietrich's view, is simultaneously an act of structuring being. Hence, philosophy must maintain its independence from theological presuppositions, since its object -being as such- requires an autonomous rational investigation. This approach, while grounded in the Aristotelian tradition, also incorporates elements of Augustinian inwardness. The intellect's resemblance to the divine mind reveals that it is not only a cognitive power but also a metaphysical principle. As Dietrich writes: "*Intellectus, qui per se est actus, est lux qua illuminantur omnia quae cognoscuntur*" - "The intellect, which is in itself act, is the light by which all things that are known are illuminated." (Dietrich von Freiberg, 1995, pp. 10-12) For Dietrich, the distinction between philosophy and theology should be sought as much in the sources of knowledge they employ (reason and revelation) as in their understanding of being. Theology is concerned with the interpretation of divine truths, while philosophy analyses the rational structures of being and knowledge. By accentuating this distinction, Dietrich conveys the impression of criticising the amalgamation of theological dogma with philosophical method.

5. Kurt Flasch's Theses

Kurt Flasch's interpretation of Dietrich of Freiberg offers a perspective that challenges established narratives in the history of philosophy-both historically and methodologically. Rather than treating Dietrich merely as a scholastic thinker, Flasch situates him within two broader contexts: first, in indirect continuity with Arabic philosophy -particularly Avicenna's metaphysics of intellect- and second, as a precursor to modern transcendental philosophy. These two interpretative axes require close analysis, both in terms of conceptual content and intellectual-historical context.

5.1. The Influence of Arabic Philosophy

One of Kurt Flasch's central theses is that Dietrich of Freiberg's theory of intellect -especially as formulated in *De intellectu et intelligibili*- bears deep structural affinities to the metaphysics of intellect developed by Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā). In Avicenna's model, the *intellectus agens* (al-ʿaql al-faʿāl) functions both as the final

in natura intellectualis substantiae plantavit, ut supra satis actum est." Dietrich von Freiberg, (1995, p. 169).

stage of the human cognitive process and as the metaphysical source of intelligible forms. It illuminates the human mind and enables the abstraction of essences, acting as both epistemological guide and ontological principle (Flasch, 1972, pp. 142-148). According to Flasch, Dietrich reinterprets this model within a Latin framework: the *intellectus agens* is no longer primarily a cosmic or external intermediary, but becomes an inner intellectual principle through which the human mind actively generates concepts (*entia conceptionalia*) and constitutes the *quidditas* of things. This creative understanding of the intellect challenges any passive or merely receptive model of cognition. The intellect does not merely reflect external objects; rather, it shapes and determines the essential nature of what is known (Flasch, 2006, pp. 93-95).

This view becomes particularly evident in Dietrich's concept of *ens conceptionale*, which expresses not simply a mental image, but the very activity by which the intellect forms concepts and definitions. As Flasch emphasizes, this position mirrors Avicenna's metaphysical configuration of the *agent intellect*, which serves as the origin of intelligibility. While Dietrich avoids Avicenna's emanationist cosmology and maintains a distinctly Christian framework, his epistemological model nevertheless reflects a structurally similar conception of the intellect's creative role (Bertolacci, 2006).

The availability of Avicenna's major works in Latin translation during the 13th century -such as the *Liber de anima* and *Liber de philosophia prima*- provides further support for this connection. Translated by figures like Gerard of Cremona and Dominicus Gundissalinus, Avicenna's theories of intellect and metaphysics deeply informed the intellectual context in which Dietrich formulated his own positions. Moreover, Dietrich's holistic notion of *universitas entium* -the totality of being encompassing all levels of existence, including God- resonates with Avicenna's principle of metaphysical continuity. Flasch notes that Dietrich reworks the idea of metaphysical unity in a strikingly original fashion, combining Augustinian introspection with Avicennian structure. This synthesis, according to Flasch, positions Dietrich as a figure who bridges late antique Neoplatonism, Arabic metaphysics, and Latin scholasticism.

5.2. Dietrich's Legacy in Christian Mysticism

Dietrich of Freiberg's project, though rooted in scholastic metaphysics and epistemology, extends its influence beyond strictly academic discourse into the domain of mystical theology. His distinct emphasis on the active role of the intellect, the internal structure of cognition, and the unity of being and knowing created a conceptual environment in which later thinkers -especially figures

associated with the German mystical tradition- could articulate a more interiorized relationship between soul and divine reality.

One of the most significant vectors of this influence appears to be through the thought of Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-1328), arguably the most prominent representative of deutsche Mystik. Research suggests that Eckhart was familiar with the intellectual culture shaped by Dietrich's major works, including *De visione beatifica* and *De intellectu et intelligibili*. In particular, Dietrich's metaphysical explorations of the transcendentals and the soul's relation to God clarify concepts that later surface in Eckhart's mystical theology. Dietrich's intellectus agens -conceived as both the source of intelligibility and the inner principle enabling cognition- helped pave the way for Eckhart's own account of the hidden ground of the soul. This later concept, central to Eckhart's sermons and Latin works, posits an ineradicable point within the soul where divine presence is directly encountered and where the act of knowing ultimately becomes an act of participation in divine being.

Eckhart often describes the soul's deepest center as a place where God is "immanently present" and uncreated. As summarized in scholarly literature, Eckhart famously asserted that the "*Seelengrund*" (ground of the soul) is not created like other creatures but is "*ungeschaffen*" (uncreated), remaining in immediate proximity to the divine essence. This idea resonates with Dietrich's insistence that the intellect is not merely receptive but is ontologically active, shaping the very conditions under which being and knowing coincide. While Dietrich frames this within a scholastic metaphysical model, Eckhart remodels it in a mystical register, describing the soul's encounter with the divine as an event of inner birth and realization.¹³

Both Dietrich and Eckhart emphasize a fundamental link between cognition and being. For Dietrich, knowing is an ontological act -*quidificatio*- whereby the intellect constitutes the form or essence (*quiditas*) of an object. For Eckhart, the final stage of knowing God involves the "*birth*" of the divine in the soul, an image he uses to describe the moment of union with the eternal Word. This mystical *birthing* -where God is found experientially within the soul- echoes Dietrich's prioritization of the inner activity of intellect as the ground of knowledge. While Dietrich situates the intellectual constitution of universal forms within a metaphysical order of emanation and participation, Eckhart transposes this into

¹³ Flasch emphasizes Dietrich's role as an important intellectual intermediary between the Arabic philosophical tradition, as mediated by Albert the Great, and the emergence of German speculative mysticism, particularly in the thought of Meister Eckhart. Flasch, (2006).

a *theologia mystica*, where the inner intellect becomes a space of direct divine encounter.

5.3. Toward Transcendental Philosophy

Kurt Flasch's third major thesis concerns Dietrich of Freiberg's position as a forerunner of transcendental philosophy. In his 1972 article published in *Kantstudien*, Flasch draws attention to a structural parallel between Immanuel Kant's claim that "objects conform to the mind" (*die Gegenstände richten sich nach unserem Erkenntnisvermögen*) and Dietrich's theory of conceptual formation in *De origine rerum praedicamentalium*. According to Dietrich, certain logical and ontological categories are not merely discovered in the world but are actively constituted by the operations of the intellect. This implies that the intellect is not a passive cognitive faculty but a constitutive principle that defines the very conditions under which being can be thought and known.¹⁴

Flasch argues that Dietrich anticipates, in a distinctive medieval idiom, a central insight of Kantian transcendental philosophy: namely, that the structure of the knowing subject plays a decisive role in shaping the knowable world. While Kant posits a set of *a priori* conditions -such as space, time, and the categories of understanding- as the necessary framework for the possibility of experience, Dietrich envisions the intellect as the ground of *conceptual intelligibility* within a metaphysical rather than phenomenological horizon. His intellect does not structure appearances (*Erscheinungen*), but establishes the essential intelligibility (*quidditas*) of beings at the level of ontological categorization. Thus, Flasch is careful not to suggest a direct historical influence or continuity, but rather a *structural analogy* between Dietrich's metaphysical epistemology and Kant's transcendental critique. This analogy is not merely thematic but methodological: both thinkers explore how the intellect constitutes the conditions of meaning and intelligibility, albeit from differing ontological and theological commitments.

Flasch's broader philosophical project is to challenge linear, progressivist accounts of intellectual history that sharply separate medieval and modern thought. Instead of treating the Enlightenment as a radical break from medieval scholasticism, he proposes a hermeneutics of conceptual continuity and transformation. From this perspective, Dietrich emerges not merely as a scholastic metaphysician but as a philosophical innovator who anticipates critical concerns about the status of consciousness and the constitutive role of the subject

¹⁴ For structural comparisons between Dietrich von Freiberg and Kant -particularly regarding the constitutive role of the intellect and the limits of metaphysics. See Flasch, (1996); Aertsen, (1996).

- issues that would later become central in Kant's transcendental philosophy. Ultimately, Flasch's interpretation repositions medieval philosophy as a field of conceptual innovation and critical reflection. Dietrich's philosophical method, grounded in the autonomy of reason and the inner structure of intellect, becomes an early expression of problems that resurface in modernity. His position thus invites a reconsideration of the Middle Ages not simply as a period of systematic theology, but as a dynamic arena of philosophical experimentation.

Conclusion

This study has examined Dietrich of Freiberg's theory of knowledge in close connection with its ontological presuppositions, his principled distinction between philosophy and theology, and his broader historical legacy. Taken together, these analyses demonstrate that Dietrich articulates a highly original epistemological position within medieval thought -one that cannot be reduced either to Aristotelian abstractionism or to Augustinian illumination alone. At the center of his philosophy stands the intellect as an active, constitutive principle: not merely a receptive faculty, but the source through which intelligible structure, conceptual determination, and epistemic necessity are brought into being.

Dietrich's epistemology is inseparable from his ontology. By distinguishing *ens reale* from *ens conceptionale*, and by assigning to the intellect a genuine role in the constitution of quidditative structures, he redefines the relation between being and knowing. Knowledge is not the passive reception or representation of an already completed reality; it is an act in which the intellect confers intelligible form and determines the "whatness" (*quiditas*) of things. Universality and necessity, therefore, do not arise from empirical objects themselves, but from the intrinsic structure and activity of reason. In this sense, Dietrich advances a conception of knowledge in which epistemology and metaphysics mutually implicate one another. This position marks a significant shift in emphasis with respect to Thomistic epistemology. Against Thomas Aquinas's model of abstraction from sense data, Dietrich insists on the autonomy and primacy of intellectual activity. His critique of transubstantiation further illustrates this methodological commitment: philosophical reasoning, grounded in the principles of non-contradiction and intelligibility, must not be subordinated to theological dogma. Here Dietrich emerges not as an opponent of theology, but as a rigorous defender of the internal coherence and legitimacy of philosophy as a discipline governed by its own rational principles.

From a historical perspective, Dietrich's originality lies not in abandoning medieval metaphysics, but in transforming it from within. As Kurt Flasch has persuasively argued, Dietrich's conception of the intellect as a constitutive

condition for certain kinds of objects introduces a structural reversal that anticipates key features of later transcendental philosophy. While Dietrich does not articulate a fully developed transcendental method in the Kantian sense, his claim that intelligible objects conform to the activity of reason rather than vice versa marks a significant reorientation in the history of epistemology. The parallel with Kant, therefore, should be understood not as a claim of direct influence, but as a structural analogy that reveals deep continuities across historical divides.

Dietrich's legacy extends beyond scholastic debate. His emphasis on the intellect's inner activity, its reflexive self-knowledge, and its proximity to the divine ground of being resonates strongly in the speculative mysticism of Meister Eckhart and the Dominican tradition. In conclusion, Dietrich of Freiberg should be regarded as one of philosophically innovative thinkers of the late Middle Ages. His theory of knowledge offers not only a critical alternative to dominant scholastic models, but also a conceptual framework that helps illuminate the long-term development of Western epistemology. By reconceiving the intellect as an active, constitutive power, Dietrich opens a space in which medieval metaphysics, early mysticism, and modern philosophical concerns intersect.

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