

# THE VOICE OF REASON: MEDIÉVAL CONTEMPLATIVE PHILOSOPHY

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**Abstract:** Scholastic debates about the activity of our final end—happiness—become famously heated in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, with intellectualists claiming that the primary activity through which we are joined to God is intellectualive ‘vision’ and voluntarists claiming that it is love (an act of will). These conversations represent only one set of medieval views on the subject, however. If we look to contemplative sources in the same period—even just those of the Rome-based Christian tradition—we find a range of views on our final end that runs the gamut from ‘self-less union with an unknowable God’ to ‘embodied fulfilment of human nature.’ In this article, I argue that these differing conceptions push their holders to develop a correspondingly wide range of attitudes toward the human faculty of reason, particularly with respect to its value (or lack thereof) in helping us achieve our ultimate end. Medieval thinking on this topic is thus much more complex—and offers more points of connection with contemporary philosophical theology—than is typically recognized.

One of the guiding questions in medieval scholastic philosophy is “What is the ultimate end of human beings?” Although the most basic answer to that question (as with many scholastic questions) was “God,” debates about the best way to understand our relation to God in the activity of our final end—happiness—become famously heated in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, with intellectualists claiming that the primary activity through which we are joined to God is intellectualive ‘vision’ and voluntarists claiming that it is love (an act of will).<sup>1</sup> Rich and varied as these discussions are, however, the conversations happening in the university system in this period represent only a narrow swath of medieval attitudes toward our ultimate end. As I’ve discussed elsewhere, if we look to contemplative

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas’s (intellectualist) account and John Duns Scotus’s (voluntarist) account become the foci for this debate, which is often seen characterizing the divide between Dominican and Franciscan approaches to our final end. For an overview of the debate, see [Hoffman 2009](#).

as well as scholastic sources—even just within the Rome-based Christian contemplative tradition of late twelfth through early fifteenth centuries—we find a range of views about our final end that run the gamut from ‘self-less union with an unknowable God’ to ‘embodied fulfilment of human nature via the God who became incarnate.’<sup>2</sup> In this article, I argue that these differing conceptions push their holders to develop a correspondingly wide range of attitudes toward the human faculty of reason, particularly with respect to its value (or lack thereof) in helping us achieve our ultimate end.<sup>3</sup> Medieval thinking about reason’s relation to religion and theology is thus much more complex—and offers more points of connection with the variety of views found in contemporary philosophical theology—than is typically recognized.

In [Section 1](#), I lay out the shared scholastic and contemplative understanding of the set of human rational faculties, which stresses the discursive and dialectical nature of reason. In [Section 2](#), I turn to the contemplative tradition that cautions against relying on reason to reach our final end, on the grounds that our final end consists in annihilating our individuality in order to merge fully with God. Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart, and the *Cloud of Unknowing*, for instance, argue that although we need reason to help us get on track, once we’re on the right path, continued reliance on reason impedes rather than aids our progress toward self-abnegation. In [Section 3](#), I look to contemplative views that portray our ultimate end in terms of self-fulfillment rather than loss of self. These views tend to offer a more positive assessment of reason, emphasizing its usefulness in guiding us toward our ultimate end, increasing and deepening love, grounding faith, and even linking us with God. In addition to the general understanding of human beings as created in God’s image, contemplatives such as Richard of St. Victor, Hadewijch, Catherine of Siena, and Julian of Norwich argue that because in the Incarnation Christ became fully human as well as fully divine, our rational capacities connect us directly to God’s divinity as well as Christ’s humanity. In this strand of the medieval Christian contemplative tradition, reason functions as an essential aid for attaining our ultimate end, whether that end is understood as intellectual contemplation or volitional fulfilment via love.

## 1 What Is Reason?

No overview can hope to do justice to the complex space that reason (*ratio*, *resoun*, *raison*, etc.) occupies in medieval epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of mind, moral psychology, logic, and ethics. Indeed, because reason plays so many roles in so many sorts of conversations, it would be

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<sup>2</sup> See [Van Dyke 2019](#).

<sup>3</sup> Similar expansions could—and should—be made with respect to Jewish, Islamic, and Greek contemplative texts. For some sources on this topic in these traditions, see [Verman 1992](#); [Tannenbaum 2002](#); [Lazikani 2021](#); [Rigeon 2014](#); [Frank 2005](#); [Strezova 2014](#).

a mistake to try to pin the concept down too narrowly here. At the same time, there is a general understanding of what human faculty of reason is and how it works that proves common to scholastic and contemplative, ecclesiastical and lay discussions, and it is this understanding of reason as inherently discursive and dialectical that I want to highlight in this section.

First and foremost, reason is understood in the Middle Ages as one of the chief powers among the ‘rational capacities’—capacities that were viewed as setting the human being apart from other animals. Medieval discussions followed their ancient predecessors in using hierarchically ordered sets of capacities to divide living beings into three basic categories: vegetative, sensory, and rational. So, for instance, plants can take in nutrition, grow, and reproduce, while animals are able to do all these things and also perceive, desire, and move toward and away from things in the world around them. Plants were thus described as having ‘vegetative’ or ‘nutritive’ capacities, while animals were described as having both vegetative and ‘sensory’ or ‘sensitive’ capacities. Human beings possess vegetative and sensory capacities. They also possess the ability to make second-order judgments about those perceptions, desires, and movements; to engage in reasoning and argumentation; and to desire and choose things under abstract labels such as ‘the good’ and ‘the true.’ These higher powers were labeled ‘rational’ capacities and divided into two categories according to how closely related they were to material and sensory concerns: imagination and ‘sense memory’ were seen as dependent on matter (because they require sensory input to function), while reason, intellect, will, understanding, and ‘intellective memory’ were seen as transcending matter (because they deal first and foremost with universals rather than particulars).

Medieval authors sometimes use ‘reason’ to refer generally to the entire set of intellectual or rational capacities (as when angels are described as rational, although they don’t reason discursively), but it is reason as a particular power among the set of rational capacities that will be the focus of this paper. In this more narrow sense, reason is the power to deliberate between options, make judgments, construct arguments, and arrive at knowledge of both concrete and abstract truths. Reason is a discursive and dialectical power, meaning that reason’s investigations proceed in stages, moving from one premise to another in the process of arriving at conclusions (as opposed to grasping a priori truths in their essence or grasping arguments in on glance, which is the work of understanding). In contrast to the will—an appetite for the good as such—reason is a ‘logical’ faculty in the Greek sense of *logos*; it is intrinsically linked with human linguistic and argumentative abilities.

It is this discursive and dialectical nature that makes reason a popular subject both in scholastic discussions and in medieval literature with a contemplative or moralistic bent—particularly texts written in dialectical or dialogic form. Following on the literary and philosophical precedent set by Augustine’s *Soliloquies* (which features a dialogue between Augustine and

Reason) and Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* (in which Philosophy appears to Boethius in his prison cell to encourage him to think more rationally about his fate), Reason is frequently personified in medieval literature as a conversational foil for a protagonist grappling with moral and/or spiritual questions.<sup>4</sup> These personifications of Reason present reason as a faculty essential for negotiating the material world, for gaining knowledge of abstract truths, and for knowing ourselves. At the same time, reason is not portrayed as capable of reaching our highest end as human beings on its own power. Attaining our final end requires God's work as well as our own, particularly God's grace—a truth that holds regardless of differing conceptions of the activity that constitutes our final end. That said, contemplative understandings of this activity vary widely, and the role reason plays in reaching this activity vary just as widely.

## 2 Reason as Stepping Stone and Foil

Contemplative and mystical philosophy and theology are often thought to be anti-rational—committed to the view that reaching our ultimate end requires abandoning the use of both reason and the knowledge it produces in the journey toward a Divine that transcends thought and experience. Although this is hardly the whole story (or even the central plot of the story, as we'll see in [Section 3](#)), it is true that there is a strong apophatic bent in much medieval contemplative writing. In addition to the pseudo-Dionysian tradition continued by John Scotus Eriugena, frustration with the elitism of the ecclesiastical and university systems and its increasingly specialized discussions led a number of contemplatives from the late thirteenth century and on to downplay and/or criticize the usefulness of reason and *scientia* (knowledge arrived at via formal arguments and demonstrative syllogisms) in attaining theological ends.<sup>5</sup> In reason's place, these contemplatives emphasized the primacy of love; reason is relegated to stepping stone—a faculty that allows us to recognize the truth about our relation God, even when that means recognizing that our ideal relation to God involves the surrender of the will and selfless love, not intellectual union. Yet even in the most extreme of these cases (a loss of individuality so radical that its proponents spoke of being emptied of self to the point that only God

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<sup>4</sup> Influential personifications of Reason appear, for instance, in Richard of St. Victor's *Twelve Patriarchs* and Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus*. Reason is also a central character in the works of both Marguerite Porete and Hadewijch—albeit to very different effect, as we'll see in [Section 2](#) and [Section 3](#), respectively. Reason is also one of the three figures who appears to Christine de Pizan at the outset of her *City of Ladies* (the other two are Rectitude and Justice); Lady Reason helps Christine build the foundations for her refuge for women by sharing a long list of women known for their intellectual acuity and wisdom.

<sup>5</sup> See [McGinn 2005](#) for a general overview; for more on *scientia* in this period, see [Pasnau 2010](#).

remains<sup>6</sup>), reason still plays a role as a foil in contemplative texts, meant to help the text's audience understand what the journey to God both does and does not entail.

We find a simple example of this in Book Two of Mechthild of Magdeburg's late thirteenth-century *Flowing Light of the Godhead*. Drawing on the popular tradition of fin' amour, epitomized by the Arthurian legends of Lancelot and Guinevere and Tristan and Isolde, Mechthild presents a dialogue between Lady Soul and Lady Knowledge in which Lady Knowledge asks the Loving Soul—praised as the image of God and depicted as a bride with “noble longing” and “boundless desire” for God—to say something to her about the “ineffable intimacy” that exists between her and God. In response, Lady Soul replies:

Lady Knowledge, that I shall not do.  
Brides may not tell everything they experience.

...  
My privileged experience of God must always be hidden  
From you and all creatures except for myself. (FLG II.82)<sup>7</sup>

Lady Knowledge must remain content merely to praise the image of God she sees in Lady Soul, “my mistress and my queen,” rather than being privy to an understanding of the soul's union with God. Mechthild often depicts the Soul in this way—namely, as a bride whose are fulfilled by God in ways that she cannot share with Reason, thus emphasizing the apophatic aspect of such union.<sup>8</sup>

Mechthild also takes specific aim at professors of theology and others trained in argumentative reasoning in a passage in which she expresses worry that her book won't be taken seriously because it's written by a woman outside the formal systems of knowledge. In response God assures her that “the course of the Holy Spirit flows by nature downhill,” illuminating and inspiring the lowly, and then takes a bit of a dig at the university set:

One finds many a professor learned in scripture who is  
actually a fool in my eyes.  
And I'll tell you something else:  
It is a great honor for me with regard to them, and it very  
much strengthens Holy Christianity

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<sup>6</sup> This is what is typically meant when mystics or contemplatives talk about ‘becoming God.’ See, for instance, the Sister Catherine treatise in Meister Eckhart 1986, in which Sister Catherine wakes from a mystical death and asks her confessor to rejoice with her, because she has become so dead to her individual selfhood that she has become nothing but God.

<sup>7</sup> Citations to *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* (Mechthild of Magdeburg 1998) are to “FLG,” followed by Book and page number in the Paulist Press translation by F. Tobin.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the dialogue between the Loving Soul and God in their bridal chamber, where “What happens to her then—[only] she knows—and that is fine with me,” FLG I.62.

That the unlearned mouth, aided by my Holy Spirit, teaches  
the learned tongue. (FLG II.97)

In short, knowledge of Scripture doesn't necessarily lead to wisdom, whereas Christianity's claim to divine inspiration is made stronger by that wisdom being preached by the less erudite.

This skepticism about reason's ability to access divine wisdom (and, in the process, unite human souls with God) not only appears in texts throughout the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries but is amplified in texts that advocate abnegation of the self to the point where no experience of human individuality is left and only God remains. In this tradition, reason's primary role is to demonstrate what it is that the contemplative needs to relinquish, and how clinging to arguments and explanations can impede the process.

Perhaps the most extreme example of this tradition is the early fourteenth-century *Mirror of Simple Souls*, written by Marguerite Porete, who is burned at the stake in Paris in 1310 for refusing to recant the views in it that were judged heretical by a Dominican inquest. Like Mechthild of Magdeburg's *Flowing Light*, Porete's *Mirror* draws on the fin' amour tradition and is cast (at least initially) as a dialogue between three noble ladies: Reason, Soul, and Love.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the conversation, which is divided into 136 chapters, Love tries to convince Soul to empty herself of everything that is not Love and to become Love itself. As early as chapter 7, Love tells Reason that "nothing remains in her own intellect" of the soul annihilated in love (MSS 7, 85);<sup>10</sup> true to character, however, Reason keeps asking questions and demanding answers and explanations. When Reason asks Love who she is and receives the following reply: "I am God," says Love, "For Love is God and God is Love, and this Soul is God by the condition of Love. I am God by divine nature and this Soul is God by righteousness of Love" (MSS 21, 104), for instance, Reason doesn't understand what Love is telling her and continues her inquiry. Love and the Soul become increasingly frustrated with Reason's inability to comprehend the full scope of Love's vision for the Soul—Soul complains that Reason's questions are dragging out the conversation "because of the answers you need, both for yourself and for those whom you nourish who move along at a snail's pace" (MSS 53, 131). Although initially important for explaining the overall goal of the *Mirror* and making initial distinctions (particularly between Love and the virtues), Reason's ongoing discursive process distracts from the Soul's emptying herself of all thought and individual will to merge in undifferentiated union with Love.

A crucial turn in the conversation occurs when the Soul announces her realization that "I am nothing except Love," and Reason is so overwhelmed

<sup>9</sup> For more on the tradition of fin' amour in Porete, see [Robinson 2001](#).

<sup>10</sup> Citations to *The Mirror of Simple Souls* ([Marguerite Porete 1993](#)) are to "MSS," followed by chapter and page number in the Paulist press translation by E. Babinsky.

that she gasps, “How dare one say this? I dare not listen to it. I am fainting truly, Lady Soul, in hearing you; my heart is failing. I have no more life” (MSS 87, 163) and dies. The Soul’s response is to rejoice: “Why did it take so long, this death!” She immediately makes it clear that Reason was holding her back: “For as long as I had you, Lady Reason, I could not freely receive my inheritance, what was and is mine. But now I can receive it freely, since I have wounded you to death with Love” (MSS 87, 163). The inheritance Soul speaks of here is the complete abnegation of individuality in selfless union with Love. Indeed, by the close of the *Mirror*, Love alone speaks, offering a soliloquy about what has happened to the Soul. The Soul can no longer speak for herself, for “she retains nothing more of herself in nothingness, because God is sufficient of Himself, that is, because He is and she is not. Thus she is stripped of all things because she is without existence, where she was before she was” (MSS 135, 218).<sup>11</sup> In this self-less union, in which Soul has lost all individuality only God remains, human reason has no place. When Love goes on to observe that “The whole is one to [the Soul] without an explanation (*propter quid*), and she is nothing in such a one” (MSS 135, 218), she is announcing that the Soul has moved beyond any need for even the highest form of knowledge (*scientia*) achievable via reason. (According to the scholastic logical tradition built on Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*, demonstrations *propter quid* are what lead to *scientia* in its strictest sense.)

Although Porete’s views were condemned along with her, parts of the *Mirror* (with her name removed) were distributed in Latin and vernacular collections and influenced a number of later contemplatives. Perhaps the *Mirror*’s greatest influence comes via Meister Eckhart’s views on detachment and self-abnegation.<sup>12</sup> Eckhart, a fourteenth-century Dominican known (like Bonaventure) for both his scholastic and his contemplative works, maintains that one of the most important things we must detach from is our reliance on the natural faculty of reason and the knowledge it produces. In making this claim, moreover, Eckhart sometimes contrasts the knowledge that comes through sense perceptions and reason from the sort of knowing that links us most closely with God. As he writes:

The soul has something in it, a spark of intelligence, which never goes out. . . . There also exists in our souls a capacity for knowing external things. This is a knowing through the senses and through reason, that is, a knowing through sensible images and through concepts. Such knowing conceals this other knowing from us. How are

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<sup>11</sup> At this stage of annihilation, the Soul “does not pray, no more than she did before she was.” Her union with God is so complete that praying to God would be God praying to Godself, as Porete notes in Chapter 136.

<sup>12</sup> Eckhart would have been familiar with Porete’s views from living in the Dominican chapterhouse in Paris at various points during her three-year imprisonment and trial. For further similarities in their thought and points of influence, see the relevant essays in McGinn 1994.

we Sons of God? By having one being with him. (METP 76, 327–328)<sup>13</sup>

Here, as in Porete's *Mirror*, we find the idea that the sort of knowledge which human beings acquire through reason not only fails to lead us toward our ultimate goal but can, in fact, actively impede the most relevant 'inner' sort of wisdom concerning God—something that reason can neither grasp itself nor assist in the recognition of. Detachment releases our hold on individuality so that we can draw closer to this shared being and the corresponding surrender of egoistic self: "If I am to know God without means, without images, and without likeness, God actually has to become me, and I have to become God" (CMW 70).<sup>14</sup> Reason may be necessary for negotiating the created material world, but on this view, the unknowable God utterly transcends human rational faculties (and even being itself).

We also find this attitude toward reason in the fourteenth-century anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing*. Like Porete and Eckhart, the *Cloud* recognizes reason as one of the principal powers of the human soul; it is described as a power that "helps us distinguish the evil from the good, the bad from the worse, the good from the better, the worse from the worst, and the better from the best" (COU 144).<sup>15</sup> Reason and thought cannot lead to union with God, however. Only love can attain this end: "No matter how sacred, no thought can ever promise to help you in the work of contemplative prayer, because only love—not knowledge—can help us reach God. As long as you are a soul living in a mortal body, your intellect, no matter how sharp and spiritually discerning, never sees God perfectly" (COU 28–29). The English *Book of Privy Counseling* (anonymous but likely written by the same author as the *Cloud*) offer a similar take on the need to go beyond reason, using the Old Testament story of Rachel, who dies giving birth to Benjamin, to emphasize the importance of contemplative love over human rational powers:

Benjamin represents contemplation, and Rachel represents reason. As soon as seekers of God are touched by genuine contemplation, they work to make themselves nothing and God everything, and in this high, noble decision, it's as if their reason dies. . . . Benjamin is a symbol of all contemplatives who experience the ecstasy of love that takes them beyond the powers of the mind. (COU 193)

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<sup>13</sup> Citations to *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher* (Meister Eckhart 1986) are to "METP," followed by Sermon and page number in the Paulist press translation by B. McGinn, F. Tobin, and E. Borgstadt.

<sup>14</sup> Citations to *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart* (Meister Eckhart 2010) are to "CMW," followed by Sermon number in the translation by Maurice Walshe.

<sup>15</sup> Citations to *The Cloud of Unknowing* and to the *Book of Privy Counseling* (Anonymous 2009) are to "COU" followed by the page number in the translation by Carmen Acevedo Butcher.



### 3 Reason as Guide, Love's Counterpart, and Link to Divinity

It is not surprising that contemplatives who hold that our final end consists in inexpressible union with an unknowable God would see reason and the knowledge it enables as potentially impeding movement toward our ultimate end (although, as we've seen, even they recognize reason's importance for negotiating earthly life). What is perhaps surprising to modern philosophers is that this attitude toward reason is actually a minority view among contemplatives in the twelfth to fifteenth centuries. As we'll see in [Section 3](#), any number of medieval contemplatives across geographic regions and religious orders portray reason as vital for such vital tasks as guiding us toward our ultimate end, increasing and deepening love, and uniting us with Christ's humanity in a way that also connects us inseparably to God's divinity.

#### 3.1 Reason as Guide

The influential Hugh of St. Victor maintained during the early twelfth century that reason both can—and should—bear a close and mutually beneficial relationship to theology and the heights of contemplative union. Later, Richard of St. Victor expands on this idea in his *The Twelve Patriarchs*, painstakingly analogizing each of the figures in the Biblical story of Jacob/Israel to illustrate the relation between the various faculties of the human soul.<sup>16</sup> Reason is personified as Rachel, the wife of Jacob's heart, while Jacob's other wife, Leah, represents affection and the will. This choice demonstrates the Victorine emphasis of reason as the more central of the soul's rational faculties, as well as their relative roles: "Reason, by which we distinguish things; affection, by which we love. Reason, resulting in truth; affection, resulting in virtue" (TP III, 55).<sup>17</sup> Illumined directly by God, the role of reason is "to meditate, to contemplate, to distinguish, and to understand" (TP IV, 57); Reason's natural pursuit of wisdom is what Richard identifies as our central goal in this life. Yet, just as the matriarch Rachel dies giving birth to her son Benjamin, so reason is superseded in direct contemplation of God: "And so when Benjamin is born, Rachel dies, because the mind, having been carried away to contemplation [by the light of divinity], experiences how great the failure of human reason is" (TP LXXIV, 131). The intellectual union with God that the Victorines portray as our final end is not one in which discursive reason and argumentation can play a part. As Richard continues, "Let no person suppose that he is able to penetrate to the splendor of that divine light by argumentation; let no person believe that he is able to comprehend it by human reasoning" (TP LXXIV, 131). God's illumination and grace must bridge the gap between human capacities and vision of the divine essence. Although the human

<sup>16</sup> This work is also known as *Benjamin minor*.

<sup>17</sup> Citations to *The Twelve Patriarchs* ([Richard of St. Victor 1979](#)) are to "TP" followed by the chapter and page number in the translation by Grover Zinn.

faculty of reason cannot itself take part in this final act, it is reason (rather than the will) that is understood as the highest among natural human faculties on this view, and it is reason (rather than the will) that is directly responsible for the work that ultimately gives birth to contemplation of God.

We see a similar role given to reason in Alan of Lille's late twelfth-century *Anticlaudianus*. The allegorical poem tells a story in which Nature wishes to make an ideal human being. Nature soon realizes, however, that the soul for this human being will need to be created directly by God. It is the personification of Reason who then devises a plan for requesting that God make this soul—she suggests Phronesis (Prudence) be the messenger, and she commissions the seven liberal arts to build a chariot in which Phronesis can go to heaven and make Nature's request. Once the chariot is constructed, Reason harnesses the five senses to it as horses, and begins to drive Phronesis toward God. When they reach the end of the created universe, however, the senses refuse to go farther, and Reason herself falters. Eventually, Phronesis goes ahead with the help of Theology and Faith, with Reason rejoining her for the return journey. As in *The Twelve Patriarchs*, Reason is portrayed as the most important of the human rational faculties—without it, there would be no plan, no vehicle for leading Phronesis toward God, and no forward motion for that vehicle. At the same time, as in the Victorine tradition, reason's skill in negotiating the material world and progressing via immaterial truths toward God cannot take us all the way to union with the divine.

Among natural powers of the rational soul, reason reigns supreme in both these texts. The highest form of contemplation is born from reason, not affection or the will, and phronesis is a virtue more closely related to reason than to any other human faculty. In this respect, Richard of St. Victor's and Alan of Lille's depictions exemplify themes common to many twelfth and thirteenth century scholastic texts. Human beings are endowed with reason, which allows us to transcend the material world of particulars and to access the realm of immaterial truths and divine beings. At the same time, the natural light of reason is not enough in itself to connect us to God in a way that fully satisfies either our intellects or our wills. For that, we need both divine illumination and grace. Thus, Thomas Aquinas begins his massive *Summa theologiae* by distinguishing between knowledge gained by the 'light of natural reason' and the knowledge gained by the 'light of divine revelation.' Aquinas argues that we need both to reach our final end, a 'Beatific Vision' in which we everlastingly contemplate God's essence—an intellectual act which God makes possible via grace and illumination.<sup>18</sup>

When Lady Reason appears as the first of the three virtues who helps Christine de Pizan build the City of Ladies, then, Pizan is drawing on a long

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<sup>18</sup> For further discussion of Aquinas's beatific vision, see [Van Dyke 2015](#).

tradition.<sup>19</sup> Although, like the *Anticlaudianus*, *The City of Ladies* is not a contemplative text per se, Pizan's personification of Reason—identified as a daughter of God—draws on all the traditional contemplative and philosophical tropes. In addition to channeling Boethius's Lady Philosophy in both appearance and manner of address, Reason also carries a mirror instead of a scepter, a reference to the importance of self-knowledge (which is often symbolized in this period with a mirror). Reason tells Christine that “No one can look into this mirror, no matter what kind of creature, without achieving clear self-knowledge. . . . Thanks to this mirror, the essences, qualities, proportions, and measures of all things are known, nor can anything be done well without it” (CL 9).<sup>20</sup> With her tales of women famous for their knowledge, wisdom, and scientific innovations and discoveries, Reason provides an essential foundation for the further work of Rectitude and Justice, allowing women to live securely (and to welcome Mary, Queen of Reason, to the completed fortress).

### 3.2 Reason as Love's Counterpart

Aquinas's Franciscan contemporary, Bonaventure, agrees that the knowledge we acquire through rational investigation is distinct from knowledge we gain via doctrine or revelation.<sup>21</sup> Yet Bonaventure is not as inclined to give intellect supreme place among our rational faculties. Instead, he stresses the role of the will and love in attaining our ultimate end; in this, he is joined by a number of thirteenth- to fifteenth-century contemplatives and later Franciscans such as Duns Scotus. The claim that love is more central than reason in the fulfillment of our ultimate end is not, however, the claim that reason impedes that fulfillment. In fact, many mystics famous for their emphasis on the power and primacy of love (such as Hadewijch, Catherine of Siena, and Julian of Norwich) still view reason as enhancing and assisting that love.

The thirteenth-century Flemish Hadewijch, for instance, portrays our ultimate end as the ‘fruition of love’ in which we can “be God with God” (HCW 280)<sup>22</sup>—but she makes it clear in her letters, her poems, and her visionary literature that this end is not one we can reach without relying extensively on reason's guidance. As she writes in a letter of advice,

The power of [inner] sight has two eyes: love and reason.  
. . . These two are of great mutual help to the other; for

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<sup>19</sup> Reason, Rectitude, and Justice each take on different roles in constructing the city: Reason's primary role is to help Christine clear away the ground and lay the foundations of the city, while Rectitude helps her construct the walls and Justice helps build the turrets and fortifications.

<sup>20</sup> Citations to *The Book of the City of Ladies* (Christine de Pizan [1982] 1998) are to “CL,” followed by the page number in the translation by Earl Richards.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* 1.

<sup>22</sup> Citations to *Hadewijch: The Complete Works* (Hadewijch 1980) are to “HCW,” followed by the page number in the translation by Mother Columba Hart.

reason instructs love, and love enlightens reason. When reason abandons itself to love's wish, and love consents to be forced and held within the bounds of reason, they can accomplish a very great work. (HCW 86)

Love is a powerful motivating and unifying force, but it needs reason both to hold it in check and to direct it toward its proper end. In another letter, Hadewijch explains that we need wisdom as well as desire to fulfil love's quest: "This is why the bride of whom we read in the *Song of Songs* (3:4) sought her Bridegroom not only with desire but with wisdom; and when she had found him, she was no less anxious to hold him. Every wise soul who has been strongly stirred by love should be likewise" (HCW 68). Reason does not damp down but rather fans the flames of rightly-directed love.

In her poetry, Hadewijch also regularly portrays reason as helping the soul attain its highest end—love's union with the Beloved (God). Hadewijch employs tropes of fin'amour to create a new genre, called *minnemystik*, which casts the searching soul as a knight and Reason as a cautionary voice who ultimately holds the key to reaching the highest form of Love.<sup>23</sup> In one poem, Reason seems at first unsympathetic with the soul's quest for Love: when the soul comes crying to Reason for advice after being abandoned by Love, Reason says, "Reflect that you are still a human being!"; she then strips the soul of the fine clothing Love had given her, and teaches her to "live the truth." Eventually, however, the soul develops self-knowledge and—armed with this truth—continues her quest for genuine, lasting union with Love. The poem ends with a stanza explaining that perfect love requires the assistance of reason:

May God grant to all who love  
That they may win the favor of Reason,  
By which they may know  
How fruition of Love is attained.  
In winning the favor of Reason  
Lies for us the whole perfection of Love. (HCW 215)

In another poem, Hadewijch describes reason's role as making it clear to the soul where she is falling short in her status as "loved one for the Beloved." This role is both painful and necessary. Reason is described as Love's surgeon (the most skilled of physicians in this period), who cuts as well as heals in guiding us toward our ultimate end:

Reason herself is Love's surgeoness:  
She can best heal all faults against Love.  
To him who adroitly follows all Reason's moves,  
In all the ways in which she leads him,  
She will speak of new wonders:

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<sup>23</sup> For more on her use of this genre, and its influence on other contemplatives, see [Newman 1995](#).

“Behold! Take possession of the highest glory!” (HCW 198–199)

Reason also appears as both vital for and subordinate to the fulfillment of Love in several of Hadewijch’s visions. In Vision Nine, for instance, Hadewijch sees Reason as a queen attended by three handmaids: Holy Fear, who keeps track of our progress in the ‘life of love,’ Discernment, who distinguishes Love’s will, kingdom, and pleasure from Reason’s, and Wisdom, who allows us to perceive how great Reason’s power and works are when Reason lets herself be led by Love. Reason initially dominates Hadewijch by putting her foot on her throat, but she becomes subject to Hadewijch once she is named, and the vision ends with Hadewijch lost in the embrace of Love (HCW 285–286). In Vision Twelve, Hadewijch sees Reason as one of twelve attendants who prepare the loving soul for union with her Beloved (God). Reason’s role here is to guide and remind the soul of what God wants. As the bride, clad in a robe “made of her undivided and perfect will,” approaches the throne, Hadewijch sees that she herself is that bride and experiences love’s fulfillment in union with God (HCW 295). Throughout Hadewijch’s works, reason guides us all the way to our highest end, love’s ultimate union with the Beloved, before stepping back for love’s culmination in union with God.

In the late fourteenth century, Catherine of Siena, a lay member of the Dominican order, also consistently emphasizes the role of both reason and love in attaining union with God. Her *Dialogue*, for instance, describes knowledge and love as an upward spiral: “For love follows upon understanding. The more they know, the more they love, and the more they love, the more they know. Thus each nourishes the other” (D 85, 157).<sup>24</sup> An emphasis on the mutually beneficial relationship between love and knowledge is one of the hallmarks of Catherine’s works; in this, she echoes not just Thomas Aquinas’s conception of the Beatific Vision but also Dante’s *Paradiso*, which had been published in 1320. Catherine’s image of the tree of self has rational discernment grafted right into the trunk of charity,<sup>25</sup> and God’s favorite expression for human beings in the *Dialogue* is “la mia creatura che à in sé ragione,”—as when God entreats Catherine to “Open your mind’s eye and look within me,” for then she will see the “dignity and beauty of my creature who is intrinsically rational” (D Prologue, 26). Love unites us with God on this picture, but it is reason that leads the way.

For some contemplatives, reason is also vital for faith. Catherine of Siena also writes that “it is in reason that the light of faith is held, and one cannot lose the one without losing the other” (D 51, 103). She supports this claim by arguing that the groundwork for faith is created in us as part of the *imago Dei*. We see God when we look into ourselves, and a central part of what we see is reason. As the *Dialogue* continues, in God’s voice:

<sup>24</sup> Citations to *The Dialogue* (Catherine of Siena 1980) are to “D” followed by the chapter and the page number in the translation by S. Noffke.

<sup>25</sup> “For discernment and charity are engrafted together and planted in the soil of that true humility which is born of self-knowledge” (D 10, 41).

“I made the soul after my own image and likeness, giving her memory, understanding, and will” (D 51, 103). Memory, understanding, and will are all rational capacities, famously linked together in trinitarian form by Augustine.<sup>26</sup> Drawing on this same threesome, the late fourteenth- to early fifteenth-century English anchorite Julian of Norwich describes our faith as “a combination of the natural love of the soul, the clear light of reason, and the steadfast remembrance of God instilled in us when we were created” (SJN 151).<sup>27</sup> Rather than distracting or impeding faith, reason is central to its flourishing. This stance harmonizes with many scholastic treatments of faith, which also stress the integration of faith and reason. Although Thomas Aquinas also maintains that natural reason cannot reach all the way to God, for instance, his influential account of faith portrays it as a primarily intellectual (rather than volitional) act.<sup>28</sup>

### 3.3 Reason as Link to Divinity

Contemplatives who embrace rather than eschew reason’s ongoing role in the spiritual life also tend to stress the humanity of the incarnate Christ as a point of connection between us and the Triune God.<sup>29</sup> Hadewijch, for example, consoles a fellow beguine by linking the hard work and suffering of Christ’s human life with the eternal enjoyment of Christ’s divinity: “With the Humanity of God you must live here on earth, in the labors and sorrow of exile, while within your soul you love and rejoice with the omnipotent and eternal Divinity in sweet abandonment. For the truth of both is one single fruition” (HCW 59). Catherine of Siena makes a similar point when she describes a vision of Christ in which he appeared as a tree reaching to heaven but grounded in humanity: “I [Christ] showed myself to you under the figure of a tree. You could see neither its bottom nor its top. But you saw that its root was joined to the earth—and this was the divine nature joined to the earth of your humanity” (D 44, 90). Later, Catherine describes the humanity of Christ—and therefore all human beings—as inextricably mixed with the divinity of God: “When my Son was lifted up on the wood of the most holy cross, he did not cut off his divinity from the lowly earth of your humanity. So though he was raised so high he was not raised off the earth. In fact, his divinity is kneaded into the clay of your humanity like one bread” (D 26, 65). This homely metaphor of divinity kneaded together with humanity makes a profound theological point; Catherine is consistent

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, *De trinitate* Book XV, Chapters 20–24.

<sup>27</sup> Citations to *The Showings of Julian of Norwich: A New Translation* (Julian of Norwich 2013) are to “SJN,” followed by the page number in the translation by M. Starr.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, *Summa theologiae* IIaIIae 1, particularly 1.1.

<sup>29</sup> This tendency is not universal, though. Eckhart also stresses the role of Christ’s humanity in joining us to God, but in a way that requires us to empty ourselves of any individuality: “So, since God dwells eternally in the ground of the Father, and I in him, one ground and the same Christ, as a single bearer of my humanity, then this (humanity) is as much mine as his in one substance of eternal being, so that the being of both, body and soul, attain perfection in one Christ, as one God, one Son” (McGinn 2016, 359–360).

in her emphasis on the restoration of all our human faculties through the God-Man.

Julian of Norwich also stresses the restoration of humanity and human faculties through the Incarnation. Her initial vision is of Christ's head bleeding profusely from the crown of thorns, and the 'dearworthy' blood of Jesus plays a crucial role in her *Showings*; it is his taking on human nature that allows our 'sensuality' (sensory bodies) to be redeemed. Julian's Long Text spends a significant amount of time musing on the Trinity, in which the Second Person (Christ) is consistently linked with knowledge and wisdom. As she writes in Chapter 58, "In the Second Person, in knowledge and wisdom we have our perfection, as regards our sensuality, our restoration and our salvation, for he is our Mother, brother, and savior" (SJN 161).<sup>30</sup> Rather than advocating the need to annihilate reason and self, Julian sees both our rational faculties and our bodies as important points of connection to God. Furthermore, all of our human faculties will be restored in the attainment of our ultimate end.

#### 4 Conclusion

Discussions about the activity of our final end flourish in the Rome-based Christian intellectual and spiritual cultures of the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries, going far beyond scholastic university debates to include any number of contemplatives. As we've seen, broadening the scope of our understanding of the range of views about our final end lets us see that this range drives a variety of attitudes toward reason's role in attaining and participating in that final end. In particular, late medieval contemplative literature offers a wide range of perspectives on the human faculty of reason and its relation to God. Expanding current discussions of 'faith and reason' or 'reason and religion' to include these contemplative sources would allow us not only to better understand the full scope of medieval thought but also to draw new points of connection between contemporary discussions and their historical counterparts.

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<sup>30</sup> [Bynum 1982](#) remains the definitive study of Julian on Jesus as Mother.

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