

# Are You Alone Wise?

*The Search for Certainty in the Early  
Modern Era*

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# I

## Beginnings

### *Questions and Debates in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*

Historians of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries have rather suddenly found themselves to be popular. Social, cultural, and intellectual historians have long been toiling away in their scrutiny of the social, political, economic, and religious fabric of this age. They have rewarded us with increasingly sophisticated depictions of the piety, family life, education, regional and political conditions, societal roles, warfare, and the effect of new technologies. Intellectual historians have analyzed the interlocking patterns created by these findings and the theological, scientific, and philosophical movements that gained ascendancy in this era. Hence we know more about the epistemological debates, the developments of the *via antiqua* and the *via moderna*, the hegemony of the Franciscans, the rise of vernacular mysticism, the importance of confessionalization, the role and writings of women, the apocalyptic atmosphere, the evolution of conciliarism, the rise and nature of humanism, the exegesis of the Bible, and the ideas of both the “common man” and the major thinkers of this historical period.

All of this is the outcome of highly skilled, learned, and imaginative work by historians of all eras. What has made this age so recently important is the appeal of “early modernity.” As soon as historians and others claim allegiance to the notion of “early modernity,” the reader understands immediately the implications of the term. Should this period be characterized as late medieval or early modern? What particular elements can be identified as belonging to early modernity? The reason for these questions stems

today primarily from critiques of post-modernity. As philosophers and theologians attempt to diagnose the problems of modernity, they are looking to early modernity for the multiplicity of early modern ideas and forms in the wake of what is often seen as the “reifying” of modernity. Early modernity helps contemporary thinkers think about the developments of the modern age and provides a source for new ideas and formulations precisely because of its fluidity. Still, early modernity has been both praised and blamed. Some thinkers see this period as the beginning of the withdrawal of the transcendent, the fragmentation of the former synthesis, and the division between form and content. Nonetheless, contemporary theologians and philosophers also urge a return to early modernity, where “questions were not yet answered,” ideas were still in movement and flexible, and there was still evidence of a non-dualistic relationship between the finite and the infinite. Early modernity beckons back contemporary thinkers who are hungry for a time of creativity and openness.

To understand this heightened interest in the thought of early modernity, we must begin with the monumental work of Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (first published in 1966), which opened the debate regarding the legitimacy of an age called “modernity.” Challenging Karl Löwith’s thesis of secularization, Blumenberg argued that this period was sufficiently independent of the Middle Ages to merit its own “legitimate” epoch. According to Blumenberg, modernity was far more than merely secularization; modernity was an age in its own right, with particular identifying characteristics such as self-assertion, efficiency, technique, and modern science. The modern sensibility, Blumenberg contended, was the result of the unleashing or liberating of *curiositas*. The process of legitimating theoretical curiosity was a basic feature in the beginning of the modern age; the human cognitive appetite was unleashed.<sup>1</sup> The “trial of theoretical curiosity” ended with the victory of human curiosity; that which was once considered a vice became a virtue for the modern age. Moreover, the project of modernity was a collective one that transcended individual happiness or salvation. This collective mentality was exemplified in the idea of scientific method, which began with Frances Bacon and Descartes.<sup>2</sup> The scientific method placed the individual within a process that created knowledge in a trans-subjective manner. This process was also distinctly human instead of divine. In Blumenberg’s thesis, that which essentially defined the modern era was the belief that it could base itself on human self-assertion rather than divine intervention or dispensation.<sup>3</sup> Modernity also turned away from the search for objective and absolute truth and embraced technique or efficiency as the highest value. The result of these various factors was a world whose purpose was carried out through human self-assertion, which led to an experimental rather than contemplative understanding of theory.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the beginning of modernity, as exemplified by Copernicus and especially Bruno, was characterized by the interest in infinite worlds, the transfer of infinity from the divinity to the universe, the rejection of centering, and the

“encouragement of the consciousness to begin absolutely anew.” Rejecting the thesis of mere “secularization,” Blumenberg argued for the “legitimacy” of the modern age in terms of the newly released cognitive drive:

The initial success of theoretical curiosity in the modern age would have been inconceivable without the transition from “naïve” to “self-conscious” curiosity. The latter had not only emerged through its competition with the concern for salvation and its argument with the transcendent reservation [of realms of knowledge]; once people had presumed to peek behind the back cloth [behind the scenes] of creation, it had also been able to translate the results, as confirmation of its suspicions as well as its right to what was withheld. . . . This dynamic of self-confirmation freed curiosity from the connotations of a “base instinct” that bound man’s attention to inessential and superficial matters, to prodigies, monstrosities-in fact to *curiosa*. . . .<sup>5</sup>

The triumph of humanity’s cognitive drive resulted in a justification of knowledge that renounced medieval presuppositions about the human relationship to the divine. In modernity, “knowledge has no need of justification; it justifies itself; it does not owe thanks for itself to God; it no longer has any tinge of illumination or graciously permitted participation but rests in its own evidence, from which God and man cannot escape.” Blumenberg goes on to explain that in the age of high Scholasticism, reality was conceived as “a triangular relation mediated by the divinity. Cognitive certainty was possible because God guaranteed man’s participation in His creative rationality when He brought him into the fellowship of His world idea and wanted to furnish him, according to the measure of his grace, with insight into the conception of nature.” The triangular relationship dissolved in modernity so that “human knowledge is commensurable with divine knowledge, on the basis, in fact, of the object itself and its necessity. Reality has its authentic, obligatory rationality and no longer has need of a guarantee of its adequate accessibility.”<sup>6</sup>

Finally, Blumenberg maintained that it was the concept of “reoccupation” that best characterized the transition to the modern epoch. “The concept of ‘reoccupation’ designates, by implication, the minimum of identity that it must be possible to discover, or at least to presuppose and to search for, in even the most agitated movement of history. In the case of systems of ‘notions of man and the world’ [*Welt-und Menschenansicht*: Goethe], ‘reoccupation’ means that different statements can be understood as answers to identical questions.”<sup>7</sup> Thus he reminded his opponents, “It is enough that the reference-frame conditions have greater inertia for consciousness than do the contents associated with them, that is, that the questions are relatively constant in comparison to the answers.”<sup>8</sup>

Presupposing and acknowledging his great debt to Blumenberg’s work, Karsten Harries strives to “place greater emphasis on understanding the limits

of that legitimacy, on understanding how modernist self-assertion is necessarily shadowed by nihilism and pointing to what it might mean to step out of that shadow.”<sup>9</sup> In his magisterial work, *Infinity and Perspective*, Harries argues that the crucial intellectual moment separating the pre-modern from the modern world was the awareness of perspective and the consequent reflections on infinity. Blumenberg had discussed the interest in perspective and infinity in terms of Nicholas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno, an approach shared by Harries. For Blumenberg, Cusa broke with traditional hierarchical thinking by arguing that the geocentric worldview coupled with the idea of hierarchy was a “cosmological illusion.” Blumenberg explained that Cusa demonstrated the “position and pretension of the observer” in any attempt to understand God’s relation to the cosmos. In Bruno, Blumenberg argued, there was the argument for the actual or full infinity of the world. For Bruno, creation exhausted divinity. Thus in Bruno’s thought there occurred a radical decentering and newness with no privileged space or time.<sup>10</sup>

According to Harries, “a passionate interest in perspective and point of view” helps to characterize our self-understanding and “offers a key to the shape of modernity.”<sup>11</sup> Harries explains that the “space of perspective has its center in the perceiving eye, more generally in the perceiving subject.” Moreover, the growing interest in perspective characteristic of this age resulted in the awareness that whatever presents itself is “no more than subjective appearance. To get to ‘actuality’ or objective reality we have to reflect on perspectival appearance.” Consequently, Harries argues, “Reality cannot in principle be seen as it is. Such distrust of the eye is one of the defining characteristics of the emerging modern understanding of reality. . . .”<sup>12</sup>

Nicholas of Cusa is also a major figure for Harries. Unlike Blumenberg, Harries does not see Cusanus as a thoroughly medieval figure. The work of Cusanus shows that the interest in perspective could not be separated from reflection and speculation about the infinity of God. According to Harries, Cusanus elaborated a principle of perspective that could be expressed in the following: “to think a perspective as such is to be in some sense already beyond it, to have become learned about its limitations.” Consequently, Harries explains, “to think the essential finitude of all we can comprehend presupposes an awareness of the infinite.”<sup>13</sup> After his analysis of figures stretching from Cusanus to Bruno, Harries concludes by considering the benefit of self-transcendence. He shows that “the attempt to actually seize what such self-transcendence promises must leave behind that world in which we first of all and still most of the time feel at home. But the pursuit of truth demands this attempt. . . . If human beings by their very nature desire to know, then it is their own nature that calls them again and again beyond the points of view and perspectives assigned to them by whatever happens to be their place in the world, calls them away from what they once called home.”<sup>14</sup>

In *Cosmopolis*, Steven Toulmin argues for a “revised narrative of the origins of Modernity.”<sup>15</sup> Toulmin argued for two distinct origins of the modern world. The first was the literary or humanistic phase that began in sixteenth-century Europe; the second origin, a century later, was the scientific and philosophical phase that began in 1630. This latter phase, Toulmin maintains, led many Europeans to turn their backs on the most powerful themes of the first literary-humanistic phase. After 1600, intellectual attention focused on the rigorous pursuit of a strict rationality, a direction more rigorous and even dogmatic than the humane preoccupation of the Renaissance.<sup>16</sup> Toulmin recalls his readers to the importance of such figures as Erasmus, Rabelais, Montaigne, and Shakespeare. The reading of ancient texts emancipated these thinkers from medieval conservatism without taking them into the “modern” world of logic and rationality. The story of modernity as an “onward march of human rationality,” is distorted since it “hides ambiguities and confusions.” Toulmin concluded by saying:

Whether the 17th-century enthronement of ‘rationality’ was a victory or a defeat for humanity depends on how we conceive of ‘rationality’ itself: instead of the successes of the intellect having been unmixed blessings, they must be weighed against the losses that came from abandoning the 16th-century commitment to intellectual modesty, uncertainty, and toleration.<sup>17</sup>

Louis Dupré’s seminal work, *Passage to Modernity*, traces the breakdown of what he calls the “ontotheological synthesis.”<sup>18</sup> “Modernity,” Dupré argues, “is an *event* that has transformed the relation between the cosmos, its transcendent source, and its human interpreter.”<sup>19</sup> According to Dupré, the fragmentation of this synthesis was due largely to Nominalist thought. Prior to the early modern era, the finite participated in the infinite through form. But with late Nominalist theology, form lost this function, and the link with the divine became an external one. Nominalist theology removed God from creation so that there was no causal link between God and nature. The “trust in the essentially rational quality of nature that had supported traditional epistemology has collapsed. Henceforth ideality belongs exclusively to the mind.” Dupré goes on to say, “The transcendent factor ceases to function as an active constituent of the ontotheological synthesis. For it had been precisely through the form that the finite participated in the infinite.”<sup>20</sup> Dupré seeks to demonstrate how this removal of transcendence affected the conveyance of meaning. In the era from 1400–1600, the creation of meaning increasingly fell upon the human mind. The mind had to interpret the cosmos; instead of being an integral part of the intelligible cosmos, the person became its source of meaning. Mental life separated from cosmic being: as meaning-giving “subject,” the mind became the spiritual substratum of all reality.<sup>21</sup> Dupré maintains that “when modern thought distinguished the real as it is in itself from the real as it exists for itself,

it initiated a new epoch in being as much as a new stage of reflection. Indeed, it opened a gap in the very nature of the real that will never be closed again.” This “fateful separation” affected all areas of life, including the religious sphere.<sup>22</sup> According to Dupré, only spiritualist theologies survived, while theology lost its hold on a culture whose substance it had once shaped: “[Theology] became reduced to a science among others, with a method and object exclusively its own.”<sup>23</sup> The “passage” to modernity was characterized by the “definitive withdrawal of the transcendent dimension from Western culture.” Around 1600, “the last comprehensive integration of our culture began to break down into the fragmentary synthesis of a mechanistic world picture, a classical aesthetics, and a theological scholasticism.”<sup>24</sup> To explain the present age, Tracy, of course, recognizes the importance of the Enlightenment. In that “second revolution” a reifying or hardening occurred of that which had remained more open and fluid in the earlier modern period. At the present time, we are engaged in a critique of the dogmatic certainties of the Enlightenment. To do so, Dupré urges a return to an “earlier stage of modern culture when questions had not yet become principles.”<sup>25</sup>

In his discussion of Dupré’s work, David Tracy concurs that the early modern era produced a “crisis of form.” Tracy explains that for the pre-moderns “what appears or manifests itself through form is not our subjective construction but the very showing forth, through form, of the real.”<sup>26</sup> This understanding is difficult to comprehend for contemporary thinkers who stand as heirs of the fragmentation of the pre-modern syntheses. As Tracy argues, it is “difficult for us as inheritors of a hermeneutics of suspicion that every form may merely mask indeterminacy and every appearance or manifestation may always hide a strife involving both disclosure and concealment.” According to Tracy, “what modernity (in its dogmatic, reified Enlightenment form) broke was the pre-modern syntheses of form and content, feeling and thought, practice and theory.” Late or post-modern thinkers now face a seemingly hopeless impasse, namely

the devastating cultural and social consequences of an impoverished philosophical notion of the self aligned to a social condition of increasing possessive individualism; a pervasive mechanistic and scientific understanding of nature united to a still dominative attitude expressed in an often unbridled technology; a marginalization of any philosophical concern with transcendence, either as a general and central philosophical category or as the religious-theological question of God, united to a marginalization and privatization of religion; a reifying of a once emancipatory Enlightenment reason as a modern rationality which either continues to build, at its worst, an ‘iron cage’ (Weber) or, at the least, an increasing ‘colonization of the life-worlds’ (Habermas).<sup>27</sup>



And yet, Tracy adds, the study of early modernity furnishes us with many forms worthy of retrieval; namely, “many early modern images, symbols, hymns, myths; the Renaissance retrieval of rhetoric and poetics; the forms Cusanus and Bruno forged by developing formal, not efficient, causality to show the non-dualistic relationship between the finite and the infinite; new forms for the use of light as form in Duccio and Giotto; form as individuating in Dante; Ficino’s aesthetical philosophy; Erasmus’s narrative theology; Luther’s dialectical theology so expressive of modern unresolved tensions and oppositions; Ignatius of Loyola’s rendering anew a form for ancient spiritual exercises” and many more, including the “moving, transient, elusive modern form of Baroque culture.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, like Dupré, Tracy argues that one cannot understand the present without rethinking our culture’s history, particularly its original passage to modernity.

The relationship of this period to modernity has long been a controversial issue among both intellectual and social historians. Was Luther’s reformation the “dawn” of the modern era, as Karl Holl and his students claimed, or basically the continuation of the Middle Ages, as Troeltsch maintained?<sup>29</sup> Does the “legitimacy” of the modern age depend on the identification of theology with that which is medieval? Was Luther an epochal figure or marginal to Descartes? Was the Reformation(s) continuous or discontinuous with late-medieval theology and philosophy? If this era is denoted “modern” or “early modern,” what is its unifying force?

Leopold von Ranke’s *Deutsche Geschichte im Zeitalter der Reformation* (1881) presented the Reformation as the great birth of the modern age.<sup>30</sup> Twentieth-century scholarship, however, increasingly recognized the Reformation as comprehensible primarily as a late-medieval phenomenon. Oberman’s work in the early 1960s was instrumental in demonstrating the importance of studying the late Middle Ages in their own right and the context out of which the Reformation developed.<sup>31</sup> This approach was carried on by many scholars who examined the Reformation from the perspective of late medieval theology, exegesis, and preaching. Recently the thesis of continuity has been examined from the perspectives of social and cultural historians. The essays edited by Thomas A. Brady in *Die deutsche Reformation zwischen Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* exemplify some of the best of these discussions. In his essay Oberman maintains his pursuit of “continuity in order to identify more accurately the innovative dimension of early modern Europe, including the Reformation.”<sup>32</sup> The formation of the state or nation plays a prominent role in these analyses. Schubert argues that the institutionalizing tendencies found in the German lands were part of a single process, which began around the year 1500. Challenging contemporary thinking, Schubert maintains that confessionalism played no role in the emergence of the state. Hamm’s study of secretaries in Northern Free Cities concludes that there was no firm break between the medieval and modern eras.<sup>33</sup> The Reformation only “intensified” existing values

without radical changes. Susan Karant-Nunn further examines the interplay between tradition and innovation. Her research reveals both the survival of Catholic practices within Evangelical services as well as the force of the new practices.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the most daring of all the essays is Constantine Fasolt's argument that pushes the perspective of the Reformation back to the post-Carolingian era. In this earlier period, Fasolt explains, we find the development of features central to the Reformation era. The Reformation is then the "second act" of a process that began when Europe emerged from the ruins of late antiquity. The long-term result was the rise of the "nation." As Fasolt so eloquently writes, "the nation is the true church of modernity."<sup>35</sup> From this longer perspective, the Reformation loses its uniqueness and represents a continuation of Europe's past.<sup>36</sup>

These representative studies reveal not a break with the past or a negation of the importance of the Reformation. Rather they demonstrate the complexity of an "in-between era," a time of the interpenetration of the old with the new. The work of Berndt Hamm demonstrates this complexity as he has examined both the continuity and the discontinuity between the late Middle Ages and the Reformation.<sup>37</sup> He points out that the answer is determined by what type of history the scholar examines; the history of the natural sciences will give a different result than the history of confessionalization. From the perspective of medieval Scholasticism and the theology of piety, Hamm concludes that the "Reformation of Luther, Karlstadt, Zwingli, and Calvin, as opposed to many late-medieval *reformationes*," was a "breach in the system or a far-reaching shift in the matrix of standards and rules in Christendom." The understanding of holiness, the reformation doctrine of justification, and Luther's view of Christian freedom do represent significant breaks with the medieval tradition.<sup>38</sup> In his careful and nuanced analysis, Hamm works with several categories that depict the innovations and changes brought about by the Reformation: "radical change," "intensification" or "acceleration," and "continuation" with late medieval trends that involved a "qualitative leap." For Hamm, the late Middle Ages and the Reformation "together constitute the era of a religious transformation." Certain threads, Hamm argues, of late medieval developments are taken up, while others are discarded. Consequently, "the stimuli which are taken up acquire a different character in a changed framework."<sup>39</sup> In some ways, this analysis is similar to Blumenberg's theory of "re-occupation."

The very complexity to which Hamm points returns us to Oberman's characterization of these years as the "cradle theory," according to which each "period gives birth to the next in a way that its birthpangs will precede its coming of age."<sup>40</sup> For Oberman, the "cradle theory" accounted for the coexistence of both the continuities and discontinuities with the past. Gerhard Ebeling addressed this question by pointing out that "no age is sufficient to itself. Every age transcends its boundaries in a threefold respect." According to Ebeling every era

is part of its past because it depends on what has been transmitted. Every age moves into the future because, occupied with change, it strives beyond itself and consciously or unconsciously prepares changes which will eventually consolidate into a new epoch. And finally, every age transcends its own concrete time “and becomes a part of history as such.”<sup>41</sup> The very existence of these debates demonstrates that this was indeed a “dawn” or a time of “passage,” an era in transition; it was both late medieval and the beginning of modernity. The changes, fluidity of ideas, and the many controversies are evidence of its transitional and ambiguous character.

The transitional nature of this period also accounts for one recurring theme: namely, the concern for certitude. Scholars have usually characterized the seventeenth century as that age most concerned with certainty. Toulmin designates the era of Descartes as the “Quest for Certitude.” According to Toulmin, Descartes personified one beginning of modernity because he abandoned the modest skepticism of the humanists and sought rationalistic proofs that would provide intellectual foundations which were clear, distinct, and certain.<sup>42</sup> William Bouwsma’s recent book, *The Waning of the Renaissance, 1550–1640*, covers much of the same time period and many of the same figures and issues discussed by Toulmin. In this important study, Bouwsma argues that the era of the late Renaissance was one of “conflicting impulses” that were often “simultaneously at work, without a clear resolution yet, between the creativity and spontaneity of cultural freedom and a growing tendency toward order and restraint.”<sup>43</sup> According to Bouwsma, the forces of freedom included a number of “liberations” from the customary ways of thinking about self, knowledge, time, space, politics, and religion. These liberations broke open earlier modes of thinking about these subjects (including those formulated by the earlier Renaissance) and produced a creative expansion of human knowledge, ways of conceiving the cosmos, and the abilities of the human mind. Creativity, the imagination, the feelings of the “heart,” the rise of historical consciousness and freedom from the idealization of antiquity as well as the indefinite expansion of the cosmos all produced an era of cultural freedom and diversity.<sup>44</sup>

However, these “novelties of freedom” also caused a “cultural crisis” evident in a pervasive “anxiety” about change, boundaries, order, and identity. In Bouwsma’s analysis, the freedoms produced by Renaissance thinkers also eroded patterns of order that were equally necessary. This was an era that was “ambivalent,” poised in an “uneasy equilibrium” between the “fundamental needs for both freedom and order.”<sup>45</sup> In reaction to what seemed an unintegrated and chaotic intellectual universe, there developed a counterreaction (sometimes found even in the same writer) toward a “culture of order.”<sup>46</sup> This reaction involved a desire for boundaries, a seeking for method and system, including Scholasticism, the reform of dialectic, the ascendancy of mathematics in science, the turn toward the universal and the decline of the historical

consciousness, the restoration of the papacy, the striving for religious uniformity and the restoration of order in the arts, society, and government.

Bouwsma identifies the need for certainty with the development of this culture of order.<sup>47</sup> In fact, this drive toward order, in all of its various aspects, was itself the need to establish certainty in the wake of the anxiety produced by the various “freedoms” created by the Renaissance. Therefore, Bouwsma sees the role of certitude in a way similar to Toulmin. According to Bouwsma, the search for certainty primarily manifested itself in the later sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. This certainty was an answer or reaction against “what were increasingly seen as the frightening excesses of the freedom traditionally associated with Renaissance creativity.”<sup>48</sup>

While the seventeenth century was clearly an age that sought rationalistic answers to the question of certainty, the crisis of certainty and the “quest” for certitude were dominant themes in the early modern period stretching from the fourteenth through the sixteenth century. It is misleading to characterize the seventeenth-century quest for certainty as a *contrast* to the late Middle Ages and the Reformation. Referring to the years from 1630 onward, Toulmin asks, “Why was the Quest for Certainty so enticing not a century or so earlier or later but at just this time?”<sup>49</sup> The historical evidence is abundant that the search for certainty came to be a driving force in European thought long before Descartes and the Thirty Years War. Richard Popkin was clearly correct to include the “Intellectual Crisis of the Reformation” as an important chapter in his history of skepticism during the era stretching from Savonarola to Bayle.<sup>50</sup> This search for certitude stemmed from late-medieval concerns about epistemology, immediacy, and experience, as well as humanist historical and legal scholarship, and the religious debates of the sixteenth century. To be sure, the methods changed. The sixteenth-century preoccupation with certitude was not the rationalistic “decontextualizing” of problems, nor was it characterized by the use of logic and mathematics as a way of providing secure foundations for science and philosophy. This earlier era did more than simply bequeath the problem of certitude to the late Renaissance and the seventeenth century. This era both created and *tried to answer* the problem of certainty. In these earlier centuries, and particularly throughout the sixteenth century, the attempt to ground one’s thought in certainty permeated nearly all of the discussions. In the era of the Reformation, the issue of certainty was expressed primarily, though not exclusively, in religious terms; namely, in the analysis of sin and justification as well as in heated debates about the sacraments, tradition, authority, Scripture, the inspiration of the Spirit, the discernment of the spirits, and Scriptural interpretation. Armed with the question of certainty, the historian of this era can approach almost any topic or group: the Hussites, the radicals, the Catholic polemicists, the Protestant theologies of justification, the reaction of the skeptics, the appeal to the Spirit, and the concern with the wily deceptions of the devil. Late-medieval discussions about epistemology, optics, experience, the

church hierarchy, and the assurance of salvation reveal a common concern with certitude. It was a concern that was to become critical and urgent in the course of the sixteenth century. If the issue of certainty is not the “unifying force” of this era, at least it came to serve as a unifying question.

The importance of certitude inevitably leads to a discussion regarding the difficult idea of crisis as an interpretive historical tool. The notion of crisis is, perhaps, one too easily invoked. Those who look deeply and critically at their own times commonly conclude that their age is in a crisis. Some historians have rightly questioned the usefulness of the idea of crisis as a historical category because it is subjective and is often used to cover far too extensive periods of time, thereby making crisis the norm. Moreover, historians such as Rainer Wohfeil remind us to distinguish between a “crisis” and the conditions necessary for a widespread “*Krisenbewusstsein*.”<sup>51</sup> The utility and the problems inherent in seeing “crisis” as a useful historical category have been discussed in a sophisticated and extensive literature.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, when historians have attempted to define this era (or particular parts of this era) they have had recourse to the language of anxiety and crisis. Historians such as Oberman, Bouwsma, Graus, Greenblatt, MacIntyre, Hamm, and Bast have found that these concepts best reflect this period.<sup>53</sup> Thus we find that this was a time that manifested “the many faces of crisis.”<sup>54</sup> It was an age of “anxiety” when “no objective system of boundaries could supply either security or effective guidance.”<sup>55</sup> Everywhere boundaries were collapsing. The age from 1400 to 1600 was a period when the “crisis consciousness” becomes a widespread perception, a time when people sensed that those values and structures that had seemed fixed were now shifting, cracking, crumbling, and the inherited form of civilization was disintegrating. This era has been called a time of “epistemological crisis” when traditional ways of knowing and relating to reality were beginning to break down. Inherited modes of ordering existence revealed “too many rival possibilities of interpretation.”<sup>56</sup> Scholars of the early modern period have carefully examined the growing uneasiness about changing roles in society, the ambivalence about the traditional system of patronage, and transitions in social and political power as well as professional identities. This was a time when there seemed to be no fixed roles.<sup>57</sup> Political, social, and economic limits that once seemed self-evident were no longer firm and secure. As Bouwsma has eloquently explained:

The distinction between the sacred and profane was dissolving with the growing responsibility and dignity of lay activity and the secular state. The psychological boundaries by which the old culture had sought to understand the nature of man and predict his behavior were useless when he was no longer inhibited by the pressures of traditional community; and, experienced concretely in a more complex setting, human acts proved too ambiguous for neat ethical

classification. Even the boundaries of the physical universe, so intimately linked to those in society and the human personality, were collapsing. No objective system of boundaries could now supply either security or effective guidance. When man still clung to the old culture, he seemed to have become, in spite of himself, a trespasser against the order of the universe, a violator of its sacred limits, the reluctant inhabitant of precisely those dangerous borderlands—literally no man’s land—he had been conditioned to avoid. But his predicament was even worse if this experience had taught him to doubt the very existence of boundaries. He then seemed thrown, disoriented, back into the void from which it was the task of culture to rescue him. And this, I suggest, is the immediate explanation for the extraordinary anxiety of this period. *It was an inevitable response to the growing inability of an inherited culture to invest experience with meaning.*<sup>58</sup>

The perception of crisis was evident in works written during the early decades of the sixteenth century. In his classic work, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Stephen Greenblatt analyzed the same sentiment expressed by Bouwsma. According to Greenblatt, the most significant writings of the early sixteenth century suggest “the ‘great unmooring’ that men were experiencing, their sense that fixed positions had somehow become unstuck, their anxious awareness that the moral landscape was shifting.”<sup>59</sup> This was an era experiencing the unsettling of man’s sense of reality and a continual uneasiness about the way of “constituting reality.” It was a vertiginous world where one had to make one’s way between truth and fiction, dream and wakefulness, illusion and reality.<sup>60</sup> As one of the finest theorists of crisis explained, it is indeed

fair to characterize “crisis” as a ground-swell facet of experience, which is truly manifest in both the thought of a great many persons and in the feeling of the whole period. As such its effects can be seemingly ambiguous since crisis gives rise to a general feeling of uncertainty as well as the most strained attempts to grasp security of any kind or some abstract certitude.<sup>61</sup>

These words by František Graus refer to late-medieval culture, particularly to the Hussite crisis. For Graus, one of the main factors causing this crisis was the impact of the Great Schism. With good reasons—which go beyond the various disasters of plague, inflation, and famine—the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries have been designated as a time of crisis. This book, however, focuses on the era of the Reformation and argues that the problem of certitude, so noticeable in Graus’s analysis of crisis, became central and urgent in the sixteenth century as the traditional assumptions about God, salvation, the church, authority, the sacraments, and reality itself were undermined and continually shifting into ever-changing forms. Greenblatt’s words regarding Shakespeare

are profoundly applicable to the age as a whole: “truth itself is radically unstable.” As Graus noted about an earlier century of this era, “It was an age in which the old was coming apart and disappearing, or an age in which the foundations of later times were being laid.”<sup>62</sup>

Nonetheless, the problem of finding certitude did not originate in the heated religious debates of the Reformation. In significant ways and contexts, the question of certitude emerged repeatedly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The era of the Reformation, however, transformed the questions about certitude into the central issue of the age. Before turning to the pervasive debates about certainty in the sixteenth century, I must briefly highlight several currents of thought that characterized the earlier formulations about the possibilities of certainty. Clearly each of these selected topics has received extensive study, and I do not pretend to do them justice here. Moreover, the warnings of Quentin Skinner are still important to remember. In his penetrating article, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” Skinner identified the “mythology of coherence” as a major failing of intellectual historians who try to reconcile everything within a text or within the corpus of an author’s writing. Such historians try to harmonize contradictions or abolish tensions in order to arrive at a “unified interpretation” or a “coherent view” of an author’s thought.<sup>63</sup> The same danger is even more present in any attempt to describe an “era” or “age.” By omitting some matters and including others, the historian can characterize a period of time as a “crisis,” or “decline,” or time of “anxiety.” Not everyone felt himself or herself in a crisis, and the various disasters of the late Middle Ages were experienced only seriatim, not by anyone or any generation at the same time. However haunted I am by the fear of committing the “mythology of coherence,” I offer the following analysis of selected issues in the late Middle Ages only as a sampling of the ways in which the question of certitude surfaced during these years. By doing so, I hope to show both that the issue of certainty did not arise *ex nihilo* in the sixteenth century and to provide a means of comparison with that which was to come. The following examples evince a drive toward immediacy, the appeal to experience, and the search for the reliability of knowledge. I leave for the later chapters further late medieval developments in piety, the desire for experiential religion, the visibility or invisibility of the church, and the impact of historical thinking and knowledge. The issues discussed in this chapter occurred in the phenomena of “Nominalism” and the humanist-Scholastic debates.

In the narratives that attempt to account for the origin or nature of modernity, Nominalism plays a central role. For Blumenberg, the value of self-assertion could be re-evaluated only when the medieval synthesis unraveled. This occurred with Ockham’s Nominalism. The decisive change occurred when Nominalism called into question the provident, intelligible, and essentially rational cosmos of the Scholastics. According to Blumenberg, Nominalism

posited a God with a “groundless will” and an unchecked voluntarism.<sup>64</sup> Such voluntarism meant that the cosmos was not grounded in a divine rationality in which the human mind could participate. The human mind no longer saw its purpose in the reconstruction of an order already given and present in nature. Rather, Ockham’s principle of economy, or “Ockham’s Razor,” enabled the human being to “reduce nature forcibly to an order imputed to it by man.”<sup>65</sup> This began what Blumenberg called the “second overcoming of Gnosticism.”<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, as modernity came into existence the traditional alternatives to the question of evil were no longer possible. Escape from the world into transcendence or Epicurean *ataraxis* were not sufficient. Rather, “only insofar as physics could be thought of as producing real human power over nature could natural science potentially serve as the instrument by which to overcome the new radical insecurity of man’s relation to reality.”<sup>67</sup> In his analysis of early modernity, Dupré charged the Nominalists with being largely responsible for shattering the “organic unity of the Western view of the real.”<sup>68</sup> Dupré attributed to Nominalist epistemology the breaking of the link between thinking and reality. Rejecting the idea of impressed species, Ockham severed the traditional bond between reality and the mind. “Even the assumption that in knowledge the mind shares a universal form with the real, however deeply entrenched in the tradition, is abandoned. . . . Nowhere does the distance between mind and reality appear more clearly than in the Nominalist rejection of the so-called impressed *species*.” According to Dupré, the consequence of this epistemology was an emphasis on the independent nature of the cognitive act, an independence that furthered the isolation of the mind from extra-mental reality. Furthermore, the emphasis on the *notitia intuitiva* removed God from creation and relegated the divine to a supernatural sphere separated from nature and the reaches of evident human knowledge. With the link between mind and reality gone, the seeds of skepticism also appeared. Thus Dupré argued, “To know by means of contact with physical reality, however, is essentially a process of efficient causality, wherein no form is transferred from that reality to the mind. Indeed God may directly infuse an intuition without sense impressions.”<sup>69</sup> Dupré concluded,

The argument against the theory of *species*, first formulated by the Dominican Durandus and later adopted by Ockham and the Nominalists, discloses the different assumption that underlies the modern conception of knowledge . . .

By the same token, the transcendent factor ceases to function as an active constituent of the ontotheological synthesis. For it had been precisely through the form that the finite participated in the infinite. Christian theologians had always succeeded in maintaining the link between the forms and the realm of the divine through God’s eternal image, the divine archetype of all created reality.



In late Nominalist theology, the form lost this function and the link with the divine became a more external one. Modern thought increasingly defined the relation between the finite and infinite being in terms of efficient causality. If form was no more than a construction of the human mind, it could no longer secure the intrinsic union between the finite and the infinite.<sup>70</sup>

Dupré may have overemphasized the effect of Ockham's thought. Katherine Tachau has demonstrated that Ockham did not establish a school of Ockhamists and did not succeed in displacing visible species from the accounts of cognition. According to Tachau, "most scholars defended such mediators precisely because they thought the perspectivist account of vision, and of the psychological processes originating in vision, more adequately accounted for the observed phenomena than did the alternative that Ockham posed."<sup>71</sup> Eventually, Nominalism did gain important ground in the fields of logic, dialectics, physics, theology, and natural philosophy. *Nominales* became established as the *via moderna* in the academic institutions of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. In Paris, Nominalism was represented by Jean Buridan, Nicholas Oresme, and Pierre d'Ailly. At Heidelberg, nominalism was associated with the name of Marsilius van Inghen and in Wittenberg with Gregory of Rimini.<sup>72</sup> When the proscription against Ockham in 1339 was reinforced at Paris in 1473, a dispersal of the members of the *via moderna* ensued. As the *via moderna* grew and developed, the questions about the speculative reaches of the human mind became more and more pronounced.<sup>73</sup>

While Dupré sees Ockham's epistemology, especially the rejection of the impressed species, as breaking the ontotheological synthesis and severing the link between mind and reality, other scholars have argued that Ockham was actually trying to affirm a more direct and dependable contact with reality.<sup>74</sup> Ockham's epistemology had its origin in the criticism of Duns Scotus's doctrine of cognition. Moreover, his teaching on intuitive cognition was primarily an instrument to fight skepticism. Ockham's emphasis on intuitive cognition was intended to establish the very source of certitude. Ockham explained that there are two types of non-complex knowledge; namely, of intuitive and abstractive cognition. In this context the problem of certainty clearly emerges as the purpose of intuitive cognition. Ockham was asking how one could be certain of contingent propositions. If the intellect abstracts from the material thing, how does it combine terms in a contingent proposition such that the intellect judges with certainty that this proposition represents the facts as they really are and not simply as the intellect imagines them to be?

For Ockham, intuitive knowledge would secure the certainty of contingent propositions. Intuitive cognition, which precedes abstractive cognition, is defined

as “that cognition by means of which a thing is known to be when it exists or does not exist, in such a way that, if the thing exists, then the intellect immediately judges that it exists and evidently knows that it exists, unless the judgment happens to be impeded through the imperfection of this cognition.”<sup>75</sup> In the fifth question of the fifth *Quodlibeta*, Ockham again distinguishes between intuitive and abstractive cognition, saying that “through an intuitive cognition I judge not only that a thing exists when it exists, but also that it does not exist when it does not exist; I do not judge in either of these ways through an abstractive cognition.”<sup>76</sup> Ockham establishes intuitive cognition as the main mode of cognition that enables one to know with certitude that an object does or does not exist. He also argues that this cognition gives us certitude about the existential relations of things from which contingent propositions are formed. Intuitive cognition tells us whether one thing inheres in another, is distant from another or “stands in some other relation to the other.”<sup>77</sup> Moreover, intuitive cognition provides certitude for both sensible and intelligible objects. Consequently one can have an intuitive—and abstractive—cognition of objects of the intellect such as sorrow or love.<sup>78</sup>

In these discussions Ockham’s concern was to defend the dependability of intuitive cognition, a dependability based on the clarity, directness, or immediacy of the cognition. He insisted that intuitive cognition was temporally and logically prior to any abstractive cognition, stating, “I claim that a cognition that is simple, proper to the singular, and the first by the sort of primacy in question is an intuitive cognition. Now it is evident that this sort of cognition is first, since an abstractive cognition of a singular presupposes an intuitive cognition with respect to the same object and not vice versa.”<sup>79</sup>

Ockham is most well known for his rejection of species. To Ockham’s mind this rejection was necessary in order to guarantee the direct and simple cognition of the object as a prerequisite for all other knowledge. To preserve this directness he abandoned species as mediators between the object and the intellect. The theory of species stemmed from the explanation of perception and cognition based on vision. In the West this theory owed its existence largely to the “intromission” theory of the tenth-century thinker Alhazen (Ibn al-Haytham) as elaborated in his treatise *De aspectibus*.<sup>80</sup> The first scholar in the Latin West to assimilate Alhazen’s work thoroughly was Roger Bacon, who was also responsible for the doctrine of the multiplication of the species.<sup>81</sup> This theory became the standard explanation both for the understanding of perception and the knowledge based on perception. Put simply, the species were posited as a way to explain how the object became united with the intellect.

In the *Reportatio*, Ockham analyzed the five different reasons for advancing the existence of species, namely, to explain: (1) how the intellect assimilates the object; (2) how the object is represented to the intellect; (3) how intellection is caused; (4) how the potentiality of the possible intellect is reduced to act; and (5) the union between intellect and object in terms of “that which is moved”

and “that which moves.”<sup>82</sup> By repudiating the necessity of species in each of these cases, Ockham rejected all species, be they in the medium, in the senses, or in the intellect. Throughout his epistemological writings, Ockham frequently employed the appeal to experience saying, “*sicut per experientiam patet.*” For example, experience teaches that if species existed we would know them by an intuitive cognition. However, experience shows that this is not the case.<sup>83</sup> However, it is Ockham’s purpose for eliminating species that is crucial. He was determined to eradicate species because they posed a medium or mediator between the intellect and object.<sup>84</sup> According to Ockham such mediators would destroy direct contact between intellect and the object of perception, thereby weakening the all-important certainty of knowledge. Ockham believed that if we cannot grasp reality immediately, then we cannot be sure that we have grasped reality at all. As Tachau succinctly stated, “In immediacy lay reliability.”<sup>85</sup> We will see that in its theological form, this principle came to haunt the sixteenth century.

Ockham’s epistemology sought to secure two things. By rejecting species he tried to guarantee the certainty of existence, nonexistence, and existential judgments. Ockham also sought to secure the primacy of the singular. As Oberman stated, “We find the characteristics of Nominalism in an epistemology engendered by the new logic which relates experience and experiment (the so-called *notitia intuitiva*) in such a way that the individual—be it an inanimate object, a human being or an event—is understood in its own context as potentially new, original, and unique before it is identified by classification into *species*.”<sup>86</sup> Ockham’s epistemology stressed both the primacy of direct experience and the importance of the singular. He decisively rejected the idea that the universal was the first and proper object of the intellect and therefore the first thing known in the origin of cognition. Ockham contended that if we are speaking “of the origin of cognition, a singular thing is the first object of the senses.”<sup>87</sup> For Ockham, everything was singular. Here again, Dupré finds that with Ockham the “entire ontotheological synthesis began to disintegrate.”<sup>88</sup> According to Dupré, Nominalism meant that in knowledge the human mind no longer shared a universal form with the real. Ockham, of course, did not deny that universals were needed for human cognition. He did reject the theory that such universals existed in an extra-mental realm. Nominalists denied the widely held idea of the “moderate realists” that universals inhered in singular reality.<sup>89</sup> For Ockham, there was no abstraction of an essential intelligible element from the phantasm or the individual object. The questions we must ask, however, remain: What was the purpose of this rejection? What was the appeal of emphasizing the experienced singular? Again we return to the fact that the immediacy of experience guarantees certainty. Oberman caught the heart of the matter when he wrote, “This epistemological stance, which one may well characterize as born out of hunger for reality, is part of a more embracing revolt against the *meta*-world of heteronomous authority and canonized speculation

obfuscating, overlaying and distorting reality.”<sup>90</sup> The “hunger for reality,” and the certainty of knowing that reality, lay at the heart of Nominalism:

Against the implication that our world is a mere reflection and shadow of higher levels of being, the Nominalist insists on the full reality of our experienced world. Hunger for reality is so much the mark of Nominalism that it is a perhaps humorous but certainly a misleading tradition that bequeathed upon its opponents the name “realists.” What is often called Ockham’s razor is the slashing away of the hierarchy of being of ideas, and concepts, which sheer speculation had invented.<sup>91</sup>

Ockham was neither the first nor the last thinker to worry about the role of species in cognition. All of the prominent medieval Scholastics worried about the implications of the theory of “representationalism.”<sup>92</sup> They did not want to end up being committed “to the claim that what we primarily perceive are our inner likenesses of the world.”<sup>93</sup> Tachau argues, “As far as a defense of his own epistemological theory is concerned, Ockham’s critique of the intentional apparent being exposes *lacunae* in his own theory that would generally dissuade his medieval readers from adopting it. Most of the problems stem from what is evidently the Venerable Inceptor’s primary epistemological concern to establish the direct, propositional nature of cognition against any theory relying on representation.”<sup>94</sup> The objection to species as representations had become standard at Oxford in the early fourteenth century. As Tachau writes, “It had become virtually *de rigueur* to object—as likely for instance, Olivi and Ockham had—that a species would first lead to a knowledge of itself rather than directly to a knowledge of the object.”<sup>95</sup>

Ockham, however, sought to guarantee the direct knowledge of the object by eradicating both sensible and intelligible species. Why, then, was he suspected of being a skeptic? Ockham did admit the possibility of deception, a deception that may even be caused by God. He recognized that existential judgments could be erroneous.<sup>96</sup> But then how were true judgments to be distinguished from false ones? Ockham did not seem to believe that these erroneous judgments really threatened certitude. Thus Ockham intended primarily to preserve the centrality of propositional knowledge. But as Tachau’s study has shown, Ockham’s medieval readers were not satisfied that he did in fact protect the infallibility of scientific knowledge.<sup>97</sup>

The area where Ockham was most vulnerable to the charge of skepticism was the question of whether God can produce intuitive knowledge of that which does not exist. Can God produce in our mind a cognition by which the object seems to be present but is really absent? As Philotheus Böhner has argued, this problem and its solution was for Ockham a theological issue.<sup>98</sup> Ockham did argue that, according to God’s absolute power, it was logically possible for God to cause us to believe what is false.<sup>99</sup> According to the natural process of cognition, no such problem exists. According to our natural powers,

within the realm of God's ordained power, intuitive knowledge of a nonexistent cannot be caused or preserved naturally. As Ockham explains:

So far as natural causes are in question, an intuitive cognition cannot be caused or preserved if the object does not exist. The reason is this: a real effect cannot be caused, or brought from nothing into being, by that which is nothing. Hence, if we are speaking of the natural mode of causation it requires for its existence both a productive and a preservative cause.<sup>100</sup>

Nonetheless, Ockham admits, "Intuitive cognition of a non-existent object is possible by divine power."<sup>101</sup> He proves this first by recourse to God's power. "To say 'I believe in God the Father Almighty,' I understand this to mean that whatever does not involve an obvious contradiction is to be attributed to the divine power." Furthermore, "every effect that God is able to produce by mediation of a secondary cause he is able to produce immediately by himself. But he is able to produce an intuitive cognition of a corporeal thing by the mediation of an [corporeal] object. Therefore, he is able to produce this cognition immediately by himself."<sup>102</sup>

The centrality of the problem of certitude emerges even in this discussion regarding nonexistents. Ockham argues that this supernatural action by God's absolute power would not be known by an evident cognition. God can cause an act of belief, a subjective conviction, without factual evidence. We would then believe that an absent thing is present.<sup>103</sup> However, as Böhner argues, the cognitive basis for such a belief would not be the *notitia intuitiva* but only a *notitia abstractiva*.<sup>104</sup> Eleonore Stump has clearly shown that Ockham's discussion of an intuitive cognition of nonexistents relies on Ockham's conviction that God "in his omnipotence could cause in a human being an intuitive cognition of a cup (for example) when there is no cup present." However, she carefully points out that statements such as "by nature there cannot be intuitive knowledge without the existence of a thing which is truly the efficient cause of the intuitive knowledge," and "intuitive cognition cannot be naturally caused except when [its] object is present at a determinate distance," depend on the term *naturally*. According to Stump,

There is no limitation on God's power on his own view, Ockham says, because he holds that God can cause a false belief directly in us, although this will not be a case in which the judgment is formed in virtue of an intuitive cognition. . . . For Ockham, the reliability of the cognitive powers responsible for intuitive cognition is built into those powers themselves; it is not possible for them to produce false judgments.<sup>105</sup>

Regarding the perception of nonexistent objects, Ockham insisted that the assent of the mind was only the assent of belief or conviction, not one of

evidence. Abstractive knowledge did *not* imply the existence or presence of its object. When it comes to *evident* cognition, the mind would always judge that the thing does not exist. Therefore, “if the divine power were to conserve a perfect intuitive cognition of a thing no longer existent, in virtue of this non-complex knowledge the intellect would know evidently that this thing does not exist.”<sup>106</sup> An “evident cognition” required “that things are in reality as they are asserted to be by the proposition to which the assent is given.”<sup>107</sup> Ockham, therefore, strives to protect the infallibility or certitude of intuitive cognition.<sup>108</sup> While a “belief-cognition” can be in error, an evident cognition based on intuitive knowledge that cannot deceive. As Böhner concluded:

Evident assent, therefore, never can fail, for it is based on intuitive knowledge whether it is naturally or supernaturally produced. And since an error in this case necessarily includes a contradiction in terms, it is impossible for God to deceive anybody by intuitive knowledge. Everyday knowledge, therefore, is safe from any intrusion of natural or supernatural skepticism.<sup>109</sup>

Whether Ockham was completely successful in safeguarding against skepticism is beyond the scope of this study. Tachau has demonstrated that for some of his readers Ockham did not provide certainty regarding the correspondence between extra-mental and mental propositions. Thus the species theory remained necessary for those who were unconvinced.<sup>110</sup> That which is important for our purposes are those concerns which preoccupied Ockham, concerns that will reemerge in very different contexts in the years to come. Ockham stressed the significance of experience and made immediacy the guarantee of certainty. At the heart of his epistemology was the desire to know concrete reality with certitude. This “hunger for reality” placed the human being in direct contact with his home: namely, the created or ordained realm. However, while the human being was closer to his world, he was further from God. Ockham’s use of the distinction between the ordained and absolute power of God was a principle that would gain increasing importance. As the *via moderna* advanced, this distinction made more pronounced the restriction on the speculative reaches of the human mind. Ockham had argued for the centrality of this distinction, primarily in order to stress the ontological contingency of creation. His use of this traditional distinction had ramifications, however, for the possibilities of natural theology and the knowledge of theological truth. As Marilyn McCord Adams has shown, Ockham distinguished between evident knowledge of theological truth available to the blessed and that truth known by the *viator*.<sup>111</sup> The evident knowledge that the blessed have about God is extensive and based on intuitive cognition, known *per se*, or derivable by some non-syllogistic inference from these two forms of knowledge. The blessed will have, for example, intuitive cognition of the divine essence. The emphasis is, once again, on the immediacy of this knowledge.

For the *viator*, evident knowledge of theological truths (those truths necessary for salvation) is available either naturally or supernaturally. The fact of God's existence is naturally known. The Incarnation is known only supernaturally, that is, through revelation in Scripture. The *viator*, by definition, has no intuitive or abstractive knowledge of the Godhead. In comparison to his predecessors, Ockham greatly limited the scope of natural theology.<sup>112</sup> The importance placed on experience and the *notitia intuitiva* meant that the theological knowledge of the *viator* was limited to Scripture, the fathers, and the doctrinal decrees of the church. It was Pierre d'Ailly who identified the ordained power of God with the divine will as revealed in Scripture.<sup>113</sup> The distinction between the absolute and ordained power of God came to be the argument used to contend that any speculation that went beyond or bypassed God's self-revelation was "vain curiosity."<sup>114</sup> Such speculation left reality behind and tried to pierce the realm of infinite possibilities of God's absolute power. Hence the Nominalists voiced the attack *contra vanam curiositatem* by challenging the attempt to make philosophy penetrate the secrets unknown to human reason. Theological "speculation" and metaphysics were impediments to the knowledge available in the proper realm of human reason within the ordained sphere. Therefore, while the Nominalists limited the scope of theology, they elevated the importance of experiential knowledge of the concrete, contingent, and historical world.<sup>115</sup>

In his loneliness Nominalistic man is anxious to keep close to the reality of the world around him: an anxiety quite naturally accompanied by secularization of his interests. Man is still the *viator* to the heavenly Jerusalem, but his newly won freedom gives him the heavy responsibility of guarding against hallucinations. He can no longer afford to keep his eyes constantly on his ultimate goal, as did the Augustinian man, nor to trust his reason to the same extent as did the Thomistic man.<sup>116</sup>

The issue of illusions or "hallucinations" was fated to resurface later. Within the present context, the role of experience and immediacy, the emphasis on historical life within the real of the *potentia ordinata*, the concern with the limits of human reason, the attack on "vain curiosity," the interest in the relationship between reason and revelation, and the pervasiveness of the quest for certainty are the important elements in the spectrum of epistemological and theological Nominalism that point forward to the things to come.

In the course of the fifteenth century, the resurgence of interest in Thomism and Augustinianism and the impact of humanism tended to overshadow Nominalism, at least as a force of academic renewal. Nonetheless, debates about the nature and certainty of knowledge did not abate. Questions about human knowledge reemerged most prominently in the debates between humanists and scholastics. It is to these debates from the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that we now turn.

Scholars of the controversies between scholastics and humanists have cautioned that their division not be over-exaggerated. In 1906, Cassirer had pointed to the deeper intellectual differences between humanists and scholastics. According to Cassirer, the language used by the scholastics reflected an entire world of thought that expressed their view of the mind, nature, and the substances or essences underlying sensible things. Humanist criticism of the scholastics' barbarous style came to form a critique of cognition itself. In Valla, for example, Cassirer saw the growing appreciation for the psychological knowledge of human nature. For such humanists as Valla, this form of knowing placed rhetoric above the arid formulations of scholasticism.<sup>117</sup> Kristeller argued that humanism and scholasticism were not two irreconcilable movements or philosophies. According to Kristeller, the humanist attacks by figures such as Petrarch and Bruni were "episodes in a long period of peaceful coexistence" between humanism and scholasticism.<sup>118</sup> Spitz contended that the "battle of the *viae* in the universities in late medieval times and the struggle between scholasticism and humanism during the Renaissance period have been widely exaggerated."<sup>119</sup> Nauert recognized the need for caution in labeling the various disputants but still concluded that Northern humanists did indeed frequently express contempt for scholasticism.<sup>120</sup> Steven Ozment also noted the continuity between humanism and scholasticism. While pointing out the very real differences between Protestantism, humanism and scholasticism, Ozment argued that there was a "fundamental and lasting kinship between humanism and Protestantism. Neither had been able to find in the dominant late medieval scholastic traditions either attractive personal models or an educational program appropriate to the changed society of the sixteenth century." However, he cautioned, "Humanism and scholasticism not only defy simple, solitary definitions, but also resist a prevalent scholarly tendency to depict them as mortal enemies. The two movements actually originated together in Italy in the thirteenth century and developed side by side throughout and beyond the Renaissance. . . ."<sup>121</sup> In her research on the Spanish Renaissance, Lu Ann Homza tempered the distinction between humanists and scholastics by arguing that they were not two rival cultures. According to Homza, Spanish "ecclesiastics-cum-humanists, like European humanists in general, executed their critical and historical concerns within a scholastic heritage"<sup>122</sup> James Overfield argued that there were difficulties at the University of Vienna in the 1490s. Elsewhere in Germany, however, the reception of humanism in the universities was "much less threatening." However, by the late 1520s, "the academic and intellectual atmosphere had fundamentally changed, not only at this [Ingolstadt] Bavarian institution but throughout Germany. Nor should the examples of peaceful coexistence be allowed to cloud the condition of most German universities in the early 1500s, which at best can be described as one of uneasy tension between traditionalists and humanist innovators."<sup>123</sup>



Erika Rummel has called for careful distinctions in chronology and geography. The idea of “peaceful coexistence” had some validity for the early Renaissance, which was characterized by “doctrinal and academic latitudinarianism.” Nonetheless, the prospect of such coexistence came to an end in the era of the Reformation. She concludes that “the traditional interpretation of the humanist-scholastic debate as a fundamental rift” is appropriate for the latter phase of the controversy. No one denies the innovative force of humanism in early modern Europe, even if it did not try to destroy scholasticism altogether or claim to represent the whole of culture. However, these debates, which do appear to have had growing fundamental importance, draw into focus the growing awareness that finding certitude was an ever-increasing problem.

By concentrating on the issue of certainty, we can safely point to the centrality of method and curriculum in these controversies. Kristeller defined Renaissance humanism as a movement that emphasized what Cicero called the “humanities”: namely, grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy.<sup>124</sup> They preferred this curriculum to the traditional subjects such as arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music, and above all else, dialectic. Scholastics stressed the importance of dialectical reasoning because it alone could find the truth in doctrine and thereby protect the church from heresy.<sup>125</sup> The emphasis was on rational and orderly argumentation. Language or terminology had to be very carefully defined and used with precision. Scholastics argued for restrictive terms in theology because, as Rummel has shown, they equated precision with mental rigor. They also advocated a restriction or narrowing of the range of questions to be investigated.<sup>126</sup> Analyzing well-defined topics by means of strict definitions and the rules of dialectic, the scholastic could respect tradition, overcome heresy, and establish certitude.

Aristotle had never equated dialectics with certainty. Distinguishing dialectics from logic, Aristotle believed that only the latter dealt with necessarily true propositions. For Aristotle, dialectics was related to rhetoric, as it enabled the orator to argue, via the topics, different points of view; dialectics, therefore, concerned itself with non-necessary propositions. However, the identification of dialectics and certainty had become frequent by the early modern era. Since the premises were divinely revealed, theological truths could be established with certitude. Thus, as Rummel shows, in 1502 Conrad Wimpina argued that the scholastic thinker first makes use of “rational argumentation and strives to defend faith against garrulous challengers who show more bluster than ability. Should the certainty of rational argumentation fail us, we do not take refuge in poetry . . . but in Holy Scripture, which is our basic authority and from which we draw certainty in argumentation.”<sup>127</sup> The differentiation and evaluative ranking of dialectics and poetry revolved precisely around the issue of certitude. Poetry, Wimpina insisted, could not determine anything with certainty because it could only provide impressions of things through figurative language. Poetry, therefore, produces only belief rather than knowledge.<sup>128</sup>

Humanists did not universally concede certitude to the dialectic of the scholastics. Some argued for the power of poetry and the certainty of divine inspiration in both poetry and theology.<sup>129</sup> Rummel cites the defense of rhetoric by Lucio Flaminio Siculo in an oration delivered in 1504. Assigning first place to rhetoric, Siculo maintained that the other arts were “handmaidens of eloquence and serve her; without her splendor and ornament they would be mean. . . . And there would be uncertainty in the mind about everything and matters would remain unknown.” Rhetoric, he insisted, was the discipline “more suited to discover the truth than that which they call . . . dialectic.”<sup>130</sup>

Humanists did not completely reject dialectics. However, their vision of dialectic reveals their discomfort with the “speculative” claims to certitude made by the scholastics. Scholastic dialectic was committed to formal validity as the focus for the study of logic. In this dialectical training there were fixed patterns of argumentation, which guaranteed that from any true premise one could infer only a true conclusion. Humanist dialectics, advocated by thinkers such as Valla and Agricola, gave more attention to non-deductive inference, to “good arguments” that were persuasive and could win in a debate.<sup>131</sup> They wrestled with the problematic nature of the validity of such arguments. The concern was that the *oratio* must be persuasive without necessarily being formally valid. Not all compelling or persuasive arguments were amenable to analysis within traditional formal logic. The interest was in the active and persuasive nature of dialectic as debate between two speakers rather than formal logic.

Valla’s *Repastinatio* was a seminal work in the formation of humanist dialectics and one that demonstrated the new attitude toward certainty in argument.<sup>132</sup> His tripartite critique of scholastic logic is beyond our purposes, but several issues are illustrative of the concern with different forms of argument that forego absolute certitude. Valla’s attack on transcendentals, directed primarily against the Latin Aristotelian tradition, was an attack on the misuse of language. He wanted to abolish words such as *ens*, *entitas*, *quidditas*, and *identitas* because these words were not sanctioned by classical usage and because they enabled useless and meaningless speculation. As Valla argued, “I show that the whole of metaphysics consists in a few words, that it does not deal with things at all, but with words, and that these same words were unknown to Aristotle, thanks to his incredible dullness. I show that all these words, ‘concrete,’ ‘abstract,’ ‘*quidditas*,’ ‘essence,’ ‘*esse*,’ and ‘*ens*,’ are clearly mad and have no force.”<sup>133</sup> Like Petrarch, Valla criticized empty dialectical disputes. In doing so, he wanted to return to ordinary experience and to a simplified vocabulary. He tried to use words in their ordinary usage and maintained that such usage was perfectly adequate to express the structure of the world and the experience of that world.<sup>134</sup> Valla’s rejection of technical philosophical terms reflects his insistence on the importance of everyday life. Oratory—and philosophy—should concern itself with politics, military affairs, history, and morals. As Seigel has argued, Valla assured “that dialectic kept its proper place in relation

to rhetoric," by tying "the dialectician firmly to the linguistic standards of the orator." Both had to respect ordinary common sense, usage, and custom.<sup>135</sup> In his attempt to keep close to everyday life and language, Valla strove to abolish all attempts to create hierarchies of concepts outside of reality. Expression in language must correspond to experienced reality.<sup>136</sup> In short, language must reflect reality. Equally important was the realization and the affirmation that language was not primarily a part of metaphysics but an aspect of the historical and social world.<sup>137</sup>

Valla's work also lessened the importance of the syllogistic form of argument. The syllogism did not *alone* guarantee valid arguments. In fact, Valla sought to dislodge validity from its central position in ratiocination and argumentation.<sup>138</sup> As did other humanists, he privileged the invention of topics or *loci* over the syllogism, a method drawn from rhetoric and especially from Quintilian. Now formal validity was only one of a number of possible guides to the choice of a fitting argument.<sup>139</sup> He wanted to establish the importance of "good" or "apt" arguments that could persuade but might fall short of formal validity. Thus Valla argued against the supremacy of the strict syllogistic form, thereby making room for that which is plausible and credible. He drew upon both Cicero and Quintilian to argue that there were two kinds of proof: necessary and non-contradictory or credible. The necessary argument, he said, belongs to the logician, but both kinds belong to the orator. In all cases, the arguments should aim at conclusions that are true or credible.<sup>140</sup> Here again we see the influence of the ancient rhetorical tradition. Cicero had acknowledged that the subject matter of oratory could not be placed "outside the control of mere opinion and within the grasp of exact knowledge." According to Cicero, oratory could not, and should not, try to become a science of certitude. The orator must be content with probable arguments and demonstrations.<sup>141</sup> As Mack argues, Valla insisted that everything in the argument must be "true" in order to avoid the charge that "rhetoric and dialectic are immoral because they can teach you how to deceive."<sup>142</sup> There must be a choice among a number of possible arguments depending on topic and context. Lisa Jardine cites several important issues that emerged from the shift away from Aristotelian discussions of syllogisms and their associated *scholia* to topics-theory. First, demonstrative inference ceases to be privileged over non-demonstrative inference. Secondly, formal validity ceases to preoccupy the dialectician. The emphasis turns to how good or effective the argument is for the purpose at hand.<sup>143</sup>

Rudolf Agricola's *De inventione dialectica lucubrationes*, written in 1480 and published in 1515, became one of the most important texts for teaching in universities across Europe. His was a "topics-logic" which marked a move toward a systematic account of reasoning, including reasoning that fell short of certainty.<sup>144</sup> His work revealed the limitations in traditional notions of certainty and absolute truth; he assigned only a subsidiary role to formal validity and the syllogistic forms of ratiocination. Like Valla, he was interested in argumentation

that persuaded and influenced the hearer, thereby commanding assent. In his challenge to Aristotelian logic, he emphasized the case for “likelihood” or “probability” over certainty.<sup>145</sup> According to Agricola, dialectic was concerned with speaking convincingly (*probabiliter*), in a way suitable for creating belief in the given situation or context.<sup>146</sup> Thus both Valla and Agricola challenged the supremacy of the syllogistic form of reasoning and its sole claim to validity and certitude. Both men were interested in forms of reasoning or argumentation that convinced or persuaded rather than proved. Furthermore, both Valla and Agricola interjected a skeptical streak into their dialectics. Valla’s use of *sortes* and dilemma highlighted his general approach to reasoning; that is, the acknowledgement that arguments always fall short of certitude.<sup>147</sup> So, too, Agricola argued strongly that in actual debating, “likelihood” should be the real object of the dialectician’s attention.<sup>148</sup> In his preface to *De inventione dialectica*, Agricola stated that a “very small portion of what we know is certain and unalterable, so that, if we believe the Academy, we only know that we know nothing.” In Book VI he continued by explaining that such things as the persuasion of the people or senate about peace and war and other business of a city, including matters dealing with the law, and teaching justice, religion, and piety were the subject of dialectic and are spoken about *probabiliter*.

For almost everyone speaks *probabiliter* on the subject which they have undertaken to teach. For there is not a great supply of things known to us which can be necessary and undoubted: and if we believe the Academy, nothing at all. No one denies this about things which belong to life and to norms of behavior. Similarly, in what belongs to the knowledge of the nature of things, there is nothing which is not argued about and debated on all sides with great ingenuity. On all these subjects, then, probable things are discussed as best one can, since necessary things cannot be. If probable things could not be discussed, no one would either learn or teach those subjects.<sup>149</sup>

Throughout this era the discussion was about likelihood, degrees of certainty, and the importance of persuasion. In the debate with the scholastics, fifteenth-century humanists tried to make room for other forms of ratiocination than formal validity, syllogistic demonstration, and claims to certitude. However, a further complication should be noted in evaluating the extent of the opposition between scholastics and humanists. This complication regards the identification of “scholastic.” By the fifteenth century the *Wegestreit* was well established.<sup>150</sup> There was not only an opposition between “scholastics” and “humanists” but also a rift within scholasticism itself. Nominalism or the *via moderna* stressed, as we have seen, particular or singular reality as the basis for human cognition. The *via moderna* also sought to clarify the speculative reach of human reason when dealing with artificially constructed sets of problems. Like all scholastics, the *moderni* insisted on a “disciplined and puritanical use of language in which

a clearly established meaning verified by the respective context may be ascribed to a term [*proprietas dicendi*].”<sup>151</sup>

When the humanists mocked the barbarity of language, the verbal games, and the useless quibbles of the scholastics, they were often referring to the Nominalists. John Murdoch has described the shift toward a methodology that engendered a new critical temper in the fourteenth century as that which “brought not too few humanists to the very brink of apoplexy.”<sup>152</sup> In the course of fourteenth-century scholasticism, a narrowing of problems becomes evident, a narrowing that was related to a greater awareness of exactly which assumptions were at stake in a problem and its solution. “The *determinatio* of a given question increasingly finds itself stocked with the systematic display of needed *definitiones, distinctiones, notabilia, suppositiones*, and other *praemittenda*. And from these, of course, there follow, in equally systematic fashion, the appropriate bevy of *conclusiones*.”<sup>153</sup> As Murdoch explains, the discussion by Ockham and later thinkers demonstrates a tendency “to analyze almost any problem meta-linguistically. In place of speaking directly about the events or entities relevant to a given problem, one analyzed matters by operating with and upon the propositions and terms within propositions that stood for, respectively, those events or entities.”<sup>154</sup> The “particularist ontology” was examined in terms of a propositional analysis, the *logica moderna*, or from a “second intentional point of view.”<sup>155</sup> Thus while the Nominalists had once rebuked the *via antiqua* for vain speculation, now the humanists charged the Nominalists and all of scholasticism with “vain curiosity” and the obfuscation of reality.

A further distinction is needed regarding the “humanists.” Like scholasticism, Renaissance humanism exhibited a fundamental distinction that transcended individual differences in philosophy or ethics. Ernesto Grassi called attention to this important distinction between a purely rhetorical humanism and a humanism that stood within the rationalist ontological tradition.<sup>156</sup> The Platonism of Ficino and the Platonic Academy exemplified the latter tradition. Grassi’s work draws attention to those humanists who fundamentally challenged the rationalist understanding of truth. In so doing, he adds a further dimension and clarification to the humanistic tradition so ably analyzed by thinkers such as Rummel and Trinkaus. It is important to recognize that this challenge displayed concerns common to those Nominalists whom they criticized so harshly. They also influenced attitudes toward the attainment of certitude.

Those humanists who emphasized “rhetoric as philosophy” discounted the inherited understanding of the knowledge of being. According to this philosophic tradition, every being that is mediated to the mind through the senses has an essence through what Grassi called the “rational determination [or definition] of being.”<sup>157</sup> By means of this rational process, the mind reaches the essence of beings by removing through abstraction everything that is particular to that being: namely, the variable, relative, concrete, contextual,

changeable, particular, and accidental. As Grassi argues, “Essential reality, the nature of things, stands above (or behind) the manifold, particular, different or relative as the general or universal truth that must be *purified* through cognition from all those qualities.”<sup>158</sup>

In this traditional philosophy, the starting point of which is ontology, true knowledge is of the non-historical. The rational process that “determines being” lifts the mind to the eternal. Moreover, Grassi argues, this philosophy “proceeds from the problem of the rational definition of being, in accord with which knowledge endeavors to attain ‘surety’ or ‘certainty’ by anchoring these in abstractions, as universals, in the non-historical.”<sup>159</sup> This rational procedure enables the mind to discard anything that would deprive reason of certitude; that is, anything that is variable, empirical, particular, and temporal. In this ontological definition of being, the singular, relative, and historical are simply not as “real” or as certain as the universal. Rejecting particularity, the mind discovers the eternal truth valid in all times and all places. The consequence is that the world of becoming, the changing realm of history, is far removed from the certitude of true and unchangeable being.

Grassi’s argument is that the purely rhetorical movement within humanism bore within itself its own philosophical assumptions. These humanists took seriously the “historicity of being.”<sup>160</sup> They sought to justify the preeminence of rhetorical language such as metaphor and poetry. In so doing, they tried to give value to that realm of existence that they considered to be more fundamental or primary than that of rational deductive logic and philosophy. This rhetorical mode of thought located reality in the particular, situational, concrete, changing, and historical world.<sup>161</sup> As Seigel has shown, this emphasis on the historical, changing, and concrete world was a harkening back to the ancient model embodied by Cicero. Cicero had disapproved of the Socratic-Platonic separation between rhetoric and philosophy. Rhetoric should be joined to philosophy and address the study of *vitam et mores*. In Cicero, who was such an important model for the humanists, the most important point of combining wisdom and eloquence was the commitment to the “life of man in society.” Hence Cicero argued that one must never depart from the language of ordinary life and usage. The orator was one who, above all else, shared the common life of community.<sup>162</sup> Therefore, the disputed relationship between rhetoric and philosophy, which preoccupied the thinkers of the Renaissance era, was a dispute regarding where reality and truth lay. In this realm the source of truth found expression first in the imaginative act and the rhetorical nature of “primal” or “original” speech.<sup>163</sup> Most importantly, the rhetorical tradition called into question the certitude of absolute, eternal, rational truth. The foregrounding of experience was characteristic of this era. It was in the experienced world that one looked for certainty, not in the abstract, unchanging, and eternal. Leonardo di Vinci, who called himself the “disciple of experience,” claimed that “certainty [*certezza*] derives from experience.”<sup>164</sup>

Grassi's analysis accounts for the challenge by more purely rhetorical humanists to both the Platonism of figures such as Pico and Ficino and to the assumptions of moderate realists within the scholastic tradition. However, just as Oberman did not distinguish between the Platonic and non-Platonic views within humanism in his brief comparison of Nominalism and humanism,<sup>165</sup> so, too, Grassi underestimated the thought of the *via moderna*. Nominalism also contested the attempt to find a universal unchanging essence within the singular thing. As we have seen, by rejecting the theory of species, Ockham rejected the traditional link between the rational core of being and the mind, the link that would have provided for the "rational determination" or abstraction of being. So, too, both the Nominalists and humanists placed a renewed emphasis on the particular and on experience. The experiential, concrete, and historical world was not "a mere reflection and shadow of higher levels of being." Ockham's famous razor was a "slashing away of the hierarchy of being, of ideas, of concepts which sheer speculation had invented."<sup>166</sup>

While the humanists analyzed by Grassi would often see Nominalism as yet another form of scholasticism, guilty of barbarism in language and of obfuscating reality, nonetheless, there were significant parallels between the two movements. Both groups attacked the obfuscation of reality. Whether it was concepts, categories, or overly technical language, both movements decried anything that blocked access to the real and to what Murdoch called the "particularist ontology." They emphasized the singular and the concrete, and they sought to validate the reliable experience of the world. Both the Nominalist and the humanist lived in the sphere of the *potentia ordinata*, or the historical and sensibly experienced world. Within this realm, human beings exercised free will, scrutinized nature, and focused on the historicity of being.

More so than the Nominalists, the humanists explored the implications of living and belonging to history. They focused on the study and writing of history and the assumptions of living within history. They began to recognize the historicity of truth. In particular, they understood the ramifications of human knowledge as appropriate to the ever-changing historical realm:

The historical aspects of the realization of the mind are *never eternally valid*, never absolutely "true," because they always emerge within limited situations bound in space and time; i.e. they are probable and seem to be true [*verisimile*], probably only within the confines of "here" and "now," in which the needs and problems that confront human beings are met.<sup>167</sup>

In this worldview, the objects of contemplation were not eternal and unchangeable first principles. Rather, the object of thought was the changing, contextual, and societal world. Throwing human concerns into the realm of the historical had important consequences for the issue of certainty. Downgrading the claim of certitude based on rational syllogistic demonstration and the elevation of the mind

through abstraction, humanists developed a significant consciousness of what it meant to live within the partial and incomplete realm of history.<sup>168</sup>

Ethical, political, and historical issues became the primary subjects of debate and discussion. This focus expressed itself in several genres, including the dialogue, the essay, and the paradox.<sup>169</sup> The most important may have been the argumentation known as *in utramque partem*. The scholastic method was well known for the *sic et non* method of analysis. The goal was to argue both sides of a question and to pronounce a settled and certain judgment. In humanism the *sic-et-non* method gave way to the argument *in utramque partem*.<sup>170</sup> Humanist reform of education emphasized the use of loci to establish arguments “on both sides” of the question. By arguing in this way, the student was rhetorically trained and concerned with probability instead of certitude. The student focused on persuasion rather than proof. Moreover, the student was encouraged to explore all aspects of the question by manipulating words, ideas, and examples in order to construct persuasive or convincing arguments.<sup>171</sup> In addition to argument *in utramque partem*, the dialogue also was a favored form of reasoning that allowed the writer to examine many sides of a question through the mouthpieces of different characters.<sup>172</sup> The dialogue, like the method of arguing both sides of the question, permitted the writer to end in suspended judgment rather than with a certain conclusion.

These developments reinforce Harries’s emphasis on the importance of perspective and perspectival thinking. The emergence of perspectival thought also had profound implications for the possibility of establishing certainty, a phenomenon that we will see in both Montaigne and Shakespeare. The awareness of perspective brought to the fore important consequences, particularly the issues of partiality and appearances. One knows something according to where one “stands” or experiences those things. Moreover, the objects of knowledge may appear to us differently from their existence in reality. As Harries has demonstrated, the central philosopher of the early modern era who examined the nature of perspective was Nicholas of Cusa. Cusa, however, was no skeptic. After exploring the finite perspectives of the human mind, Cusa concluded that the intellect that failed to seek after the truth “with certitude and face to face” would be separated from God at death. This intellect would be turned away from the truth “toward the corruptible, it falls away toward a corruptible object of desire, towards uncertainty and confusion, and into the dark chaos of pure possibility, where nothing is certain.”<sup>173</sup> Uncertainty, therefore, was equated with hell.

Cusa’s thought did point ahead to something deeply influential in the age to come. The interest in perspective and in infinity continued to advance. But in changed circumstances these issues also came to find further expression in the struggle to live within limits and the haunting possibility that the transcendence of perspective may not be possible—or even desirable. In the years to come, the essay emerged as a way of “assaying” any given subject from



various perspectives. As did the dialogue and the argument in *utramque partem*, the essay also allowed the writer to explore a topic from different perspectives but without a definitive conclusion. But before this genre came to express the the inevitability of living within the realm of change, perspective, and partiality, several further developments had to take place—that is, the study of history and the competing and challenging claims to absolute exclusive religious truth.

The fruits of historical interest and expertise were bequeathed to the coming century by the humanists. These accomplishments all indicated the interest in what Grassi called “the historicity of being.” The field of history itself contributed significantly to a profound recognition of the partial and contingent nature of human knowledge, a point that would come to full expression in the later sixteenth century. The science of philology, the humanist approach to the study of law, and the recovery of ancient philosophical and historical texts all threw into relief the reality of change and the importance of historical context.<sup>174</sup> Scholars began to see that law and language had a history and could be understood only in terms of their own historicity. Polybius was the first to have an impact on the West. Polybius, Livy, and Tacitus formed the nucleus of the revival of political history. Petrarch, Bruni, and others were instrumental in reviving the study of Greek.<sup>175</sup> The revival of Greek fueled the interest in the recovery and correction of ancient manuscripts. During this period we see an increased interest in the reliability and comparison of such manuscripts. Translation of the Greek historians also took place in the fifteenth century. Commissioned by Pope Nicholas V, Valla first translated Herodotus and Thucydides in the mid-fifteenth century. As early as 1453, Leonardo Bruni had translated parts of Plutarch, Xenophon, and Demosthenes. By the end of the fifteenth century, the works of Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, Strabo, and Appian were becoming available in Latin translation. Commenting on these translations of Greek historians commissioned by Nicholas V, Fryde declared “the whole series of translations was potentially the most revolutionary event in historiography since Fabius Pictor introduced Greek historiography into Rome at the end of the III century B. C.”<sup>176</sup>

The writing of history was also increasingly popular. The rise of national histories, in imitation of Livy, was particularly important. Leonardo Bruni composed his *Historiarum Florentini populi Libri XII* by 1439. Sabellico and Bembo wrote histories of Venice. Enea Silvio Piccolomini wrote the history of Bohemia. Lucio Marineo Siculo wrote the history of Spain. The history of England was written by Polydore Vergil. Paolo Emilio wrote the history of France, and Flavio Biondo did the same for the history of Rome and the Roman curia. Jacob Wimpheling authored a history of Germany, while Hector Boece wrote the history of his native Scotland. Following Biondo’s model, Camden authored the *Britannia*. And, finally, Machiavelli wrote the *Istorie fiorentine* by 1525.<sup>177</sup>

By the late Renaissance, the growth of historical knowledge sometimes functioned to accentuate the sense of perspectivism, and “custom” came to be

recognized as a dominant force. The study of philology and law also exerted enormous impact on the development of a historicist and relativist consciousness.<sup>178</sup> Petrarch's discovery in 1350 of part of Cicero's correspondence brought to light the realities of political and literary life in the final years of the Roman Republic. His emulation of ancient Rome continued to dominate humanist thought in Italy; however, it became increasingly clear that this was a distant and vanished civilization. The sack of Rome in 1527 proved this unsettling fact once and for all. The development of a historical viewpoint, however, is most commonly attributed to Valla. His work, *Elegantiae linguae latinae*, was one of the most influential books of the Renaissance both in terms of teaching classical usage and in terms of historical method. Valla defended the superiority of history over poetry and philosophy by arguing that history moved men to virtue by concrete examples. As we shall see, this Ciceronian exhortation regarding examples was to flounder in the sixteenth century. But this appeal to example was not as important as his philological studies. Valla's work as a textual critic included not only his critique of the Donation of Constantine and Roman law but also the emendations of Livy and of the New Testament. Hoping to resurrect the texts and spirit of classical antiquity, Valla demonstrated that language, like all phenomena, had a history.<sup>179</sup> Identifying errors and anachronisms made the Renaissance philologist aware of the growth of language and its contextual meaning. This sensitivity to historical change was particularly clear in Valla's study of Roman law. Attempting to rescue the Digest from the "barbarian" hands of the scholastic doctors, Valla wanted to restore the true sense of the Justinian Code. In the course of his research, Valla came to see that law arose gradually from custom and that ancient legal terms had to be interpreted in their original context, a context that might be very alien to the present.<sup>180</sup> Angelo Poliziano continued Valla's enterprise by arguing that philological techniques must be applied to the text of Roman law. He, too, was deeply aware of the specificity of historical texts. Like Valla, he was a founder of legal humanism and insisted on attention to context, chronology, and such instruments as inscriptions and monuments. He was intrigued with the details found in biographies. More so than Valla, Poliziano's thought was rooted in the singular, the concrete, and the particular.<sup>181</sup> He also set history above both philosophy and poetry. As one scholar has observed, "The criterion of *universalia* is jettisoned as summarily as the form and pretensions of universal history. The wood is relegated to the background; at center stage stand the trees—the dual and the detail meticulously observed."<sup>182</sup>

This interest in the concrete and the particular was a part of that deepening awareness of the "historicity of being" that characterized so many intellectual movements of this era. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to assume that *universalia* were completely forgotten. The reason that the study of history was often elevated to a central role in the humanist curriculum was that history promised to supply examples universally worthy of imitation. Thus Salutati recommended history because historians "handed down to posterity" the memory of

examples by kings and nations, the knowledge of which “warns princes, teaches people, and instructs individuals.”<sup>183</sup> The rebirth of the interest in history was originally animated by an optimism regarding the maxim of Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Cicero that “history was philosophy teaching by example.” History had a universal appeal as the *magistra vitae*. The study of history provided a storehouse of *exempla* for moral and political instruction. These examples from the past were believed to be universally applicable in quite different times and places. Despite his growing awareness of anachronisms, Petrarch still believed that history could provide a basis for contemporary moral criticism. The lessons of virtue and vice, handed down through histories, should be imitated or rejected in the present. As Renaissance historians have argued, the call for *ad fontes* was accompanied by the belief that these sources would be relevant to present concerns.<sup>184</sup> Like so many other earlier humanist beliefs, this conviction was to run aground in the sixteenth century. As a consequence of this historical work, the sense of historical change and an acute awareness of historical distance were to increase in the century to come.

These currents of thought indicate the impact that the historicity of being had on the status of knowledge. The interest in perspective, experience, history, and the limits and reliability of human knowledge leads to the heart of this study—that is, the wider sixteenth-century debates about certitude. The emphasis on limits will resurface in this century amid competing and challenging claims to absolute religious truth. Theologically the question of certainty revolved around questions regarding salvation and authority. There was a closing of ranks with exclusivity, tradition, and experience characterizing the search for the certainty of truth. The Holy Spirit would be drafted as the great determiner of truth and the guarantor of certitude. In fact, the great question of the sixteenth century can be seen as “where is the Spirit?” Whether one argued from the Scriptural text, the consensus of the church, the oral and written traditions, or from direct illumination, the Spirit everywhere became the source of authority. Moreover, the search for certainty became linked both to direct experience and to the demonic. The demonic appeared as the other side of certainty; that is, the demonic became identified with deception. We will see a transformation of the dictum that in immediacy lay reliability. The quest for certitude became inextricably linked to the problem of visibility and invisibility, surface and depth. In the latter half of the century, the plea for the recognition of limits, skepticism, partial knowledge, and humility emerged. The centrality of the contingent, changing, and partial realm of being once again came into focus as the danger of certitude gradually becomes apparent. We will also witness throughout this century the haunting suspicion that the truth or the reality behind appearances may be permanently elusive, absent, or even directly contrary to all that one once believed and trusted.