

## Phenomenology of Religious Experience III: Visuality, Imagination, and the Lifeworld

Carla Canullo\*

# God and Man as Unrepresentable Images

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**Abstract:** The Syrian bishop Theophilus of Antioch said: «Show me your man, and I will show you my God!». This sentence is a way of conveying that man is the image of God. Philosophical thought has attempted to grasp this image through the representation, which suggests the representation as both visual model and act of thought. The image as representation of thought is the method through which both God and man have been thought. This is confirmed by Immanuel Kant who, in the ‘transcendental Dialectic’ of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, showed that metaphysics thought both man (transcendental paralogism) and God (transcendental Ideal) as an ‘idea’. In contrast, Husserl’s phenomenology opened a new method by conceiving every image, and therefore also the image of God and man, not as a representation of thought but as a ‘phenomenon’ that manifests itself. The phenomenological method, based on the imperative “zu den Sachen selbst!”, would be adequate to grasp human essence that, like the divine one, is spiritual, indefinable and unrepresentable. In order to think this unrepresentability, the present paper investigates the work of Jean-Luc Marion, who thought the unrepresentable image of God and, therefore, of man, by distinguishing the image as an idol and as an icon. Above all, we will try to show that phenomenology allows us to grasp the image of God and man as an icon that cannot be constructed by thought.

**Keywords:** Image, Representation, Phenomenology, Idol, Icon, Infinity, Immanuel Kant, Jean-Luc Marion, Blaise Pascal, Georg Cantor

## 1 Image and representation

The image is closely linked to the appearing and to the showing both to the senses and to the intellect or the mind and when it is about appearing we have to deal with the *phaenomena*. How does an image *appear*? This question is apparently simple but, on closer inspection, is one of the most difficult ones. We can answer following two routes: the first is the long route of investigating the faculty of imagination, which requires that the relationship between imagination and image be clarified<sup>1</sup>. The second, which I follow here, is a shorter route that questions the *res*, i.e., the image, *as such*.

Once this choice has been made, another question arises: what do we call “image”? At first sight one will say that no matter how we grasp it, it is representation, both as a production of the intellect (mental image) and as a reproduction of something through the senses (aesthetic image). Another feature characterising the image is that it is an “image of”, that is to say, a representation that, indeed, *represents* something. Having clarified this framework it is right to start from the link between image and representation, and therefore from the conception of the image that has developed with modern philosophy.

Beginning with Descartes, in fact, the “representation” becomes the core of any cognitive act of the *res cogitans*. Kant will keep and widen the representation to the data of sensibility (*Erscheinungen*), the

<sup>1</sup> See Hedley, *Living forms of the imagination*; Hedley, *Sacrifice Imagined. Violence, Atonement, and the Sacred*; Hedley, *The Iconic Imagination*; on the history on images see Wunenburger, *Philosophie des images*.

\*Corresponding author: Carla Canullo, University of Macerata, Macerata, Italy; E-mail: carlacanullo13@gmail.com

functions of the intellect (categories), and transcendental ideas. Now, the representation can be widened in this way because, as a noun, it is made up of three elements: the Latin preposition “re” and “ad”, joined in the prefix “re”, and the Latin verb “praesentare”, “to present”. Unlike German, where representation is expressed in many ways<sup>2</sup>, the Italian language and languages that use the Latin root *repraesentare* (i.e. “re-ad-praesentare”) preserve the meaning that the verb receives from the prepositions. As the Latin prefix “re” occurs where one wants to express the action of returning or repeating, when it comes before the verb “to present” it conveys the bringing back to presence what one has previously known. The Latin preposition “ad” states instead the movement of “going towards”.

Nevertheless, even though the etymology of representation justifies its extension and the bond that links it to the image, thereby making the latter a “possible object” to be represented, there are at least two images that avoid such objectifiability<sup>3</sup>. They are God and man, two “images” that have often been linked to one another by defining man as the image of God or endorsing the idea, as Ludwig Feuerbach did, that “man is a God for man”. Now, those who advocate either theory also have to be able to say why man and God can be “an image” of one other, and to justify what makes it possible that they are so. If we chose not to conceive man and God to “objects of representation” and if we want to grasp their *Sache selbst*, then it will be necessary that they show, starting from themselves, at the same time, “how” they are.

## 2 «Show me your man, and I will show you my God!»: the turning point of phenomenology

The Syrian bishop Theophilus of Antioch said: «Show me your man, and I will show you my God!»<sup>4</sup>. This famous sentence is his reply to the philosopher who asked Theophilus to show him his God. The text goes on to argue that, just as not everything is visible for man, in the same way neither is God. Therefore neither God nor man can be shown as things or bodies. Many centuries after Theophilus’s work *Ad Autolicus*, Immanuel Kant will say the same things to criticise the claims by any metaphysics that follows such “objectivation”. According to Kant, in fact, as neither God nor man are *Erscheinungen* the categories of the intellect can know, they are also unobjectifiable.

Kant is right: if the paradigm of knowledge is the representation, every image to be known must be subject to this paradigm and therefore be the possible “object” of knowledge, as the role that imagination carries out in the *figurative synthesis*<sup>5</sup>, when for the first time it offers a determination of the inner sense, and therefore of the intuition of time. Therefore, if the *Erscheinungen* are not given for man and for God, neither can some images that are representations where a possible knowledge is established. Kant thus opens the way to the crisis of the (modern) binomial “image-representation” when this is referred to God and to man, also opening the possibility that there could be other cognitive paradigms that philosophically question the image. Among those is a paradigm where it is not the representation that “gives” the phenomenon of the *res qui agitur* but rather the *res* that gives itself starting from itself. Such a paradigm is the phenomenological path that Husserl proposed as the way “*zu den Sachen selbst*”, the core of which is the intuition that Husserl announces in § 24 of *Ideen I*. Emmanuel Levinas underlined the role that Husserl’s phenomenology had in the change of paradigm we are describing, observing how Husserl started what the French philosopher defined as “the ruin of the representation”.

In the text bearing the same title, Levinas shows how the founder of phenomenology, with the primacy of intentionality, has in fact overcome the primacy of representation. According to Levinas, intentionality

<sup>2</sup> *Darstellen*, to represent; *aufführen*, to perform a drama; *vorstellen*, to present or to mean; *vertreten* to represent.

<sup>3</sup> It could be objected that both the image of God and the image of man are objectifiable and that this is the problem that iconoclasm fights. However, this objection does not address the argument here, which wants to affirm that the image of God and man are unrepresentable and sense in which they are. It should also be pointed out that the representation spoken of in these pages is not the phenomenological “presentation” but rather the representation performed by the subject to know.

<sup>4</sup> See Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolicus*.

<sup>5</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 164.

designates «a relation essentially bearing within itself an implicit meaning»<sup>6</sup> and «bears within itself the innumerable horizons of its implications and thinks of infinitely more “things” than of the object upon which it is fixed. To affirm intentionality is to perceive thought as tied to the implicit, into which it does not accidentally fall, but in which it maintains itself by essence. Thus thought is no longer either a pure present or a pure representation»<sup>7</sup>. Levinas continues by saying that the thought is “in situation” and for that reason «[t]ranscendental activity is neither the fact of reflecting a content nor the production of a conceived being»<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, *versus* the object that thought places through the representation, we find that «the constitution of the object is already sheltered by a prepredicative “world” that the subject nonetheless constitutes»<sup>9</sup>, as it comprehends through the act of the *Sinngebung*. The “ruin of representation” bring to light, then, the horizon where one *already* is, where from the very beginning the subject and the object *already* are, capsizing the power of representation. Most of all, «in a phenomenology where the activity of totalizing and totalitarian representation is already exceeded in its own intention, where representation already finds itself placed within horizon that it somehow had not willed, but with which it cannot dispense, an ethical *Sinngebung* becomes possible, that is, a *Sinngebung* essentially respectful of the Other»<sup>10</sup>.

So far we have followed Levinas. But is it possible that this ruin also gives another *Sinngebung*, a *Sinngebung* of the images that give themselves offering their sense to the object? Aesthetics and the reflection on 20th century art have shown that this is possible, and it is sufficient to think about Kandinskji, Rothko, Calder and many other painters and artists to confirm it. But when it is about man and God, what can we say? Which meaning can the sentence «Show me your man, and I will show you my God» get? If the image can be thought without the representation and starting from its own *Sinngebung*, this sentence will announce that both the image of man and the image of God show themselves starting from themselves for something that is in both and at the same time. To say it, it is necessary to single out which is the adequate image for both man and God.

### 3 From the idol to the icon: the image’s escape from representation

There are at least two images that can be attributed to man and to God at the same time: the idol and the icon. However, in order for them to be attributed to both, they must be understood in their value of images *as such* and not as “sacred” images. For the idol this is possible, as it can be a religious idol, an aesthetic one (as for example a *kouros*), and also a conceptual one.

The fact that it is religious was already explained by Isidor of Seville in his *Etymologies*. In fact, according to Isidor, «an *idol (idolum)* is a likeness made in the form of the human and consecrated»<sup>11</sup>. Nevertheless, every aesthetic, sculptural or pictorial image can be an aesthetic idol rather than a religious one, for example with those statues whose beauty and human perfection is both an image of the divine perfection, and in which the divine perfection reflects itself in perfect human harmony. A different definition of idol is formulated by Francis Verulam Bacon, who in the *Novum organon* talks about the *idols* and the false notions that cause the human mind to be mistaken. Distinguishing between “idols of the tribe”, “idols of the cave”, “idols of marketplace” and “idols of the theatre”<sup>12</sup>, Bacon shifts the meaning of “idol” from image (either aesthetic or religious) to false notion of the human intellect. This negative image of the idol was questioned and then overcome by Jean-Luc Marion.

<sup>6</sup> Levinas, *The Ruin of Representation*, in *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, 115.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>11</sup> See Isidor of Seville, *Etymologies*, XI, 13.

<sup>12</sup> See Bacon, *Novum organon*.

In fact, the French philosopher has shown how the idol is not necessarily false but is an image that, as such, *shows* and brings to visibility: «The idol», Marion writes, «shows what it sees»<sup>13</sup>; and also: «The idol supplies vision with the image of what it sees»<sup>14</sup>. Having the function of representing the divine, «the idol has nothing caricatural, deceitful or illusory: [...] the idol produces (itself) in actuality (as) that at which vision intentionally aims»<sup>15</sup>. It is an invisible mirror that brings to the focus of vision what would never have arrived, and the movement which makes the idol as such is at stake in it, that is to say, the ascent to visibility. As the mirror is “a mirror” because it reflects, gives back an image, in the same way the idol reflects, gives back the image of the divine though freezing the vision itself: «Starting with the idol, the aim no longer progresses, but, no longer aiming, returns upon itself, reflects itself, and by this reflex, abandons as unbearable to live – not visible because neither aimed at nor *visible* – the invisible»<sup>16</sup>. That is the idol reflects and, by reflecting, “makes the aim settle”, the sight, the intention, where such settling is «what remains once the aim is stopped by its reflexion»<sup>17</sup>. The aim, therefore, no longer goes *beyond itself*. *It settles* in the idol and in that way «the invisible is defined by the reflection whose defection abandons the visible as not *visible* – in short, invisible»<sup>18</sup>. Does this mean the idol is an *unrepresentable* image? No, and Marion explains just why, by clarifying that an idol can be aesthetic but also conceptual.

The concept, in fact, as Bacon had already said, can create an idol<sup>19</sup> as it «apprehends the divine » on the basis of the subject, «it measures the divine as a function of it; the limits of the divine experience of [the subject] provoke a reflection that turns it away from aiming at, and beyond, the invisible, and allows it to freeze the divine in a concept, an invisible mirror»<sup>20</sup>. Kant himself had denounced this idol of the concept through the critique of rational theology (which he calls “ontotheology”) opening the way to moral theology<sup>21</sup>.

Now, what joins these definitions of idol is that each of them is a way of conceiving also the idol as *representation*. In fact, just as the image is a representation that re-presents either something or someone, the idol (that is an image) re-presents the visible either to the vision of the sight or of the mind. Like the image it shows lets one see and like the representation and the representing, the idol brings to visibility (*represents*) “something” either for the sight or the mind (*adpresents*, presents to). The idol is a “presenting oneself to” of something that *before was not visible* (*re-ad-presenting* oneself), it is resurgence to visibility. However, is there an image that brings what it shows to visibility without stopping and enclosing it, *i.e.* in its immanence? Yes, this image is the icon. Unlike the idol, this is «a visible figure that invites to go beyond the visible, to resurge to unrepresentable»<sup>22</sup>, that is to say the non-visible that transcends the goal. So where the idol *stops* and *freezes* (without referring beyond itself), the icon *opens* to something else.

Both the idol and the icon make something visible but they do it in different ways: the idol by stopping and freezing the content it represents in itself, the icon by *making itself* a reference to what transits in and does not stop. In contrast to the idol, the icon shows the paradox of the non-visible in the visible; it gives a visibility that is only partial. This paradox is exemplified by Nicola Cusano when he writes – about the visibility of the face of God in the icon: «Thus, then, Lord, I comprehend Thy face to precede every face that may be formed, and the pattern and true type of all faces, and all faces to be images of Thy face, which way not be limited or shared»<sup>23</sup>; and going on: «Thus, then, while I look on this pictured face, whether from the west or south, it seemeth in like manner itself to look on me, and, after the same fashion, according as I move my face, that face seemeth turned toward me»<sup>24</sup>. God’s face is unrepresentable and the icon becomes

<sup>13</sup> Marion, *God without Being*, 26.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.*, 29.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> See Kant, *The Canon of the Pure Reason*, in *Critique of Pure Reason*, 645.

<sup>22</sup> Wunenburger, *Philosophies des images*, 223.

<sup>23</sup> Nicholas Cusano, *The Vision of God*, 24.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

image of a sight that makes one look beyond, which looks in any direction, making one come back to what is behind the image – therefore transcending the image itself. That way the icon realizes a double movement, the one that *brings* to visibility a face of the invisible that precedes it and the one that *convenes* every single sight towards the invisible face that precedes it. Therefore, the icon is the image of the unrepresentable face and, in a sense, it is also *unrepresentation*, that is representation that does not fix but convenes; it is a representation of an unrepresentable in-definable, always different. “Unrepresentable”, therefore, means not only “not representable” but also “representable in always newer ways”. In the immanence of the unrepresentable image is therefore the showing of a transcendence that changes the immanence itself. And if the idol is the image in which the visible fixes and freezes its movement (for the sight that grasps it), the icon is that image where a backwards movement is made, that is to say a movement that goes towards the non-visible and therefore towards the overcoming of the image itself.

From what we have already said it is not difficult to grasp that idol and icon are the two “sides” of the image, which they express from one side in a different way, but from the other *show* that it is not fixed invariability but a *movement* of getting to *the* visibility; a visibility that in the idol shows itself in a total way, in the icon in a way that tends to go through the non-visible – that is in the less and “otherwise” visible. One (the idol) keeps the bond with the representation, the other (the icon) is unrepresentable. So far, therefore, this latter has been assigned only to God and we have still to see how even man (and not only God) can be grasped as unrepresentable image. To do so, first I will briefly summarize what has been said so far.

We have seen how the image is representation (§ 1), how the representation has undergone a crisis due to the request that asks for the showing of man and God (§ 2) and, finally, which image expresses at the same time man and God, that is, the idol (§ 3). In addition, another image (the icon) has been singled out as unrepresentable with reference to God (§ 3). If at this stage it is clear that an unrepresentable image of God is shown, it is not clear why the image of man is the same way.

I would suggest that an unrepresentable image is shown also for man (icon) because man shows himself without exhausting himself in the visibility of manifestation too, just like God. He does not exhaust himself because his showing himself is made possible by a trait that draws him nearer to God – the infinite.

## 4 Infinite of man, infinite of God

God and man are two unrepresentable images as they both are *visible* but not exhausted by visibility. And if the image, as we have said, is a resurgence movement to visibility, in one case this image stops in what is visible (idol), in the other its resurgence does not end because what is visible constantly goes beyond the point of visibility it reaches (icon). We still have to show why, since man and God are unrepresentable images and the invitation by Theophilus «Show me your man, and I will show you my God» is a provocation for those who question themselves on the sense of their showing.

The images of God and man are unrepresentable because they show in ways that visibility does not exhaust; and the visibility in them does not exhaust itself because it is movement caused by the infinite that shows itself: this is the hypothesis that I will try to support.

It is not a novel idea that the infinite can be said about God and about man: we recall the idea of the infinite that Descartes discusses in the *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia*, we remember the reprise of this idea proposed by Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* and the works of Ray L. Hart<sup>25</sup>. We also know Pascal’s fragments devoted to the two infinities, the infinitely big and the infinitely small. Finally, we know the thought devoted to the three orders and to the infinite distance that separates the order of the flesh from the order of the spirit and charity (L 793, B 793, C 829).

The *Thought* announces that «the infinite distance between body and mind represents the infinitely more infinite distance between mind and charity, for it is supernatural»<sup>26</sup>, and this *Thought* continues: «All the splendour of the external show has no lustre for those who are engaged in intellectual research. The greatness of intellectual men is imperceptible to kings, to the rich, to captains, to all those carnally

<sup>25</sup> Hart, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination: Toward an Ontology and a Rhetoric of Revelation*.

<sup>26</sup> Pascal, *The Thoughts, Letters and Opuscles of Blaise Pascal*, 317.

great. The greatness of Wisdom, which is nowhere but in God is imperceptible both to the carnal and the intellectual. These are three orders, differing in kind»<sup>27</sup>. How is it possible that the distance between these two orders is infinite if they themselves are not? Wouldn't it be necessary that these two orders be infinite too? I will address this question by first clarifying the sense of the infinite. To do so, an excellent guide is Georg Cantor, a mathematician often quoted by philosophers.

In order to identify different ways the infinite shows itself, Cantor coins the term “transfinite”. After reviving the old distinction between *potential* and *actual* infinite, the mathematician separates the latter into Absolute-Infinite (God) and transfinite. This infinite was discovered by Cantor through a represented and representable “image”, an open segment of a straight line ]0,1[. Let's begin first with the distinction between real and rational numbers. The “real numbers” (different from the natural numbers) are those numbers made up of a sign, a figure, a point and infinite figures after the point.  $\pi$  (3.14...) is a well known example, but these numbers also represent any physical characteristics (like the price of a product, the altitude of a geographical site, the mass of an atom...), every proportion between numeric representation and measured reality. These numbers had already been discovered in ancient times as an answer to the inadequacy of natural numbers to correspond to all of reality. Cantor, through the decimal representation of real numbers (for example, representing the numbers contained between the interval ]0,1[) finds out that real numbers, like natural numbers, are also infinite, but in two different ways. Going back to the line segment, there is no biunivocal correspondence between the real numbers and the natural ones, that is, real numbers are *representable but not numerable like the natural ones*. Or rather, representing real numbers and building them through the procedures that Mathematics puts at our disposal, we build another series of infinite numbers, this time, indeed, of real numbers and not natural ones. This representation brings to light their being infinite *non-potential* but *actual*.

The import of this discovery may be clearer in one of its applications, that is, the set of the points of a straight line. Considering the rational and irrational numbers<sup>28</sup>, «the irrational numbers appear as though by magic as soon as we try to reconcile the line of geometry with the numbers of arithmetic so that a point on a line is viewed as a unique real number»<sup>29</sup>. If 6 is greater than 4, in a straight line 4 should be seen to the left of 6. But on the straight line it is also possible to match points to fractions, and between 1 and 2 we can find 0.2 0.25 0.5... and so on, infinitely. Here therefore is the problem: «But the real *length*, the “meat” of the real one does not come from squeezing numbers onto it. [...] The real fabric of the line requires the *irrational numbers*. Without the irrational numbers, we would have an infinite collection of dots, very dense, but not solid – not a line»<sup>30</sup>. Cantor therefore decides to consider the *whole* of the accumulation points of a given set of points («for example, the set of irrational numbers in an interval is the set of limit points of rational numbers in the interval»<sup>31</sup>), and ends up wondering what could happen considering the set of all the accumulation points *of the whole of the accumulation points*. This way, «defining a set P, Cantor called the set of its limit points the *derived P'*»<sup>32</sup>, up to P infinite.

The discovery of the actual infinite lies in this infinite succession of *sets*, which Cantor calls *transfinite numbers*. It is not a potential infinite, evidently, but a new genre that comes to visibility, that discloses itself in the representations as “other” from the representations themselves. Cantor calls this infinite *transfinite*, an infinite able to become represented image though continuing to be unrepresentable as it in some manner continues to be infinite; a particular type of infinite, different from the Absolute though still infinite and, therefore, different from the finite.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> In mathematics, real number is a value of a continuous quantity that can represent a distance along a line. The real numbers include all the rational numbers, such as the integer 5 and the fraction  $\frac{4}{3}$ , and all the irrational numbers, such as  $\sqrt{2}$  (1.41421356..., the square root of 2, an irrational algebraic number). Included within the irrationals are the transcendental numbers, such as  $\pi$  (3.14159265...) and many more.

<sup>29</sup> Aczel, *The Mystery of the Aleph. Mathematics, the Kabbalah, and the search for Infinity*, 83.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 105

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. See also Cantor, *Contributions to the Founding of the Theory of Transfinite numbers*.

Returning to Pascal, we see that his sense of the infinite is a multiple one: the infinitely big and the infinitely small are, in fact, infinite in potentiality, but God is infinite in actuality<sup>33</sup>. In addition, even though between finite and infinite there is no possible proportion, the dialectic of finite-infinite runs through the nature of man itself and upsets him by awakening the inextinguishable wish to overcome both the finitude and the visibility. Nevertheless, only an infinite that has something to do with the finite can upset and move the finite *as such*, and this infinite is the infinite in actuality as transfinite. This latter is “non-finite” which, however, concerns the finite which shows itself as a whole; it is a kind of infinite that makes the finite upset, which prevents it from stopping at just one of its representations and, therefore, is also able to make the image of man unrepresentable as the one of God is.

At this point one could object that man, in contrast to God, is representable, so one will answer that, if you look more closely, this is also true for God and the icon presents an example of just how. However, if the infinite prevails on the finite in God and the invisibility on visibility, in man the infinite makes the finite visible according to what the *Thought* of the three orders by Pascal confirms.

In this *Thought*, the distance between bodies and spirits is announced as infinite for the infinity not as potential but in actuality – in the language used by Cantor, the transfinite. The transfinite makes an order not proportionable with the other one and, on the contrary, makes each order commensurable only with itself and visible in its inside. What in any order is invisible to the other orders comes to visibility only thanks to what defines it as a “set” (of bodies, of spirits, etc.) making it transfinite as infinitely distant from any other order; in conclusion the infinite makes the finite *internally visible* by *distinguishing it* from the other orders. By piercing it, it brings it to visibility, reveals each order *to itself*, brings those characteristics to a visibility that is invisible for others, marking its ascent to visibility for its own order. It is the infinite, finally, that *must* make every single order visible as, if that were not the case, we would not understand how the distance between the three orders is *infinite*. *That is to say, we would not understand why the infinite differentiates the three orders in a radical way, as if the infinite would not already be in the finite; this infinite distance would be an absolutely arbitrary assumption.* Therefore, if finite and infinite are incommensurable, in order to be able to talk about infinite distance (among the orders) we necessarily have to assume a kind of infinite that precisely belongs to the set of the individual orders. And this indeed cannot be different from the transfinite.

Moving through the issue this way, from invisibility to visibility, the *Thought* recaps the path of these pages: in fact, questioning why a greatness at a given point becomes visible is nothing but asking why the transfinite numbers, at a certain point, become visible from having been invisible. Neither it is different from asking why man – indefinable and unrepresentable – becomes an image coming to visibility *though continuing to be* unrepresentable. Just like God.

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<sup>33</sup> See Gardies, *Pascal entre Eudoxe et Cantor*.

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