

Comenius' Pansophia in the Context of Renaissance Neo-Platonism

Jan Čížek

This article was originally published in

Platonism and its Legacy

*Selected Papers from the Fifteenth Annual Conference
of the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies*

Edited John F. Finamore and Tomáš Nejeschleba

ISBN 978 1 898910 886

Published in 2019 by

The Prometheus Trust, Lydney

This article is published under the terms of **Creative Commons
Licence BY 4.0**

Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

The Prometheus Trust is a registered UK charity, no. 299648

www.prometheustrust.co.uk

Comenius' Pansophia in the Context of Renaissance Neo-Platonism

Jan Čížek

This paper is aimed at briefly outlining the development of the pansophic endeavour of the Czech philosopher, theologian and educational reformer John Amos Comenius (1592–1670), beginning with his first pansophic drafts from the early 1630s and culminating with his masterpiece, the unfinished *De rerum humanarum emendatione consultatio catholica*. Building upon previous research, I interpret the metaphysical concept of Comenius in the context of Renaissance Neo-Platonism, namely the work of the Italian philosopher Tommaso Campanella.¹

The first pansophic attempt in the true sense of John Amos Comenius was a complex of two extensive fragments entitled *Praecognita pansophica*. The first fragment is *Janua rerum sive Totius pansophiae seminarium*, which Comenius compiled between 1634 and 1635, and the other is *Pansophiae Christianae liber III*, which was written from 1639 to 1640.²

In the former text *Janua rerum sive Totius pansophiae seminarium*, Comenius defines pansophy as the knowledge of all that contributes to the wisdom of man, all that concerns human beings and their environment. In other words, pansophy is universal wisdom (*omnisapientia*) or omniscience (*omniscientia*).³ Comenius believes that in order to reach the ultimate goal in life – eternal life and thus also salvation – people not only need to become knowledgeable about themselves and everything around them but also about God. He consequently views the building of a true pansophy as a task superior

¹ This study is a result of the research funded by the Czech Science Foundation as the project GA ČR 14-37038G “Between Renaissance and Baroque: Philosophy and Knowledge in the Czech Lands within the Wider European Context”.

² Comenius (1974) 11–107. For more on the texts, their description, authorship and dates, cf. Odložilík (1928) 127–159; Patočka (1997) 35–38.

³ Comenius (1974) 13–14.

to any other.⁴ The essence of pansophy, according to Comenius, is the study of the three *books* or sources of divine wisdom: the visible world, Scripture and the human mind (*animus*). These universal sources of knowledge need to be examined in three ways: through the senses, faith and reason.⁵

The younger text, *Pansophiae Christianae liber III*, introduces a vision of pansophy as the only universal science (*scientia universalis*), which draws on the three books of God which contain all the knowledge humans need for both temporal and eternal life.⁶ The new pansophy will be the epitome of the books.⁷ It will be a consistent and true system of knowledge dealing with the actual nature of all things.⁸ Diligent adherence to the order of things is the best method: once finalized, pansophy will become the only coherent system and living image of the universe (*viva universi imago*) reflecting the order of things.⁹ The structure of Comenius' pansophy should thus reflect the organization of the whole of the universe. Furthermore, Comenius holds that just as the world was created in six days (the seventh day was a day of rest), so was Ezekiel's temple. Therefore, Comenius' pansophy is also established as having seven parts, these being *Propylaeum*, *Porta*, *Atrium Primum*, *Atrium Medium*, *Atrium Intimum*, *Ultimum Penetrabile*, and *Fons Aquarum Viventium*. A detailed characterization will be explained, as Comenius promises, in subsequent treatises.¹⁰

The emphasis placed on Ezekiel's temple, as the inspiration for the seven-part pansophic structure, is repeated in the other pansophic texts written in the second half of the 1630s. This connection is illustrated in *Pansophiae praeludium* and *Conatuum pansophicorum dilucidatio* by Comenius' explicit plan to name the new pansophy *Pansophiae Christianae templum*. Comenius maintains that a universal philosophical construction needs to be built, reflecting all that exists, visible and invisible, temporal and eternal. The construction would

⁴ Comenius (1974) 18–19, 23.

⁵ Comenius (1974) 25–26, 38–39.

⁶ Comenius (1974) 51.

⁷ Comenius (1974) 52.

⁸ Comenius (1974) 57–58, 75.

⁹ Comenius (1974) 79–81.

¹⁰ Comenius (1974) 81.

represent an integral union of philosophy and theology.¹¹ The structure of the pansophic work should comprise seven parts reflecting first the things of the low nobility and ascending up to a treatise on divine and eternal affairs.¹²

In the first part of this pansophy newly entitled *Prolegomena generalia*, Comenius planned to first of all provide a general explanation of the meaning, goal and purpose of pansophic efforts. The second part, *Systema notionum communium*, was supposed to introduce general terms imprinted into the human mind by God, based on which the universal laws of all things and the grounds of all knowledge would be established. The third part of the pansophy, *Atrium vulgi*, was to describe the created visible world that man can come to know through senses.¹³ *Atrium medianum*, the fourth part of the pansophic construction, was to depict the world created through human efforts and knowable through reason.¹⁴ In the fifth part of the pansophy, *Atrium intimum*, Comenius intended to help readers know themselves and access spiritual life.¹⁵ The final interior space of the pansophic temple was to be the master sanctuary, *Sanctum sanctorum*, which would bring people closer to God, the archetype of the world and human beings.¹⁶ The pansophic output was to culminate with the seventh part, *Fons aquarum*, through which the newly acquired universal wisdom would spill all over the earth and every human would be guided to the gates of eternity.¹⁷

In his pansophic texts dating back to the 1630s and early 1640s, Comenius structures pansophy as an ascendant schema which ranges from initial treatises and the introduction of general terms (from metaphysics) through a treatise on the created visible world, man and his work, to the spiritual domain. The ascent culminates by reaching the eternal, the divine.¹⁸

¹¹ Comenius (1974) 64–67. For details on Ezekiel's temple, see Comenius (1989) 69–70. For the temple as the model of the pansophic construction in general, see Neval (2007) 217–228.

¹² Comenius (1989) 70.

¹³ Comenius (1989) 71.

¹⁴ Comenius (1989) 71–72.

¹⁵ Comenius (1989) 72.

¹⁶ Comenius (1989) 72–73.

¹⁷ Comenius (1989) 73.

¹⁸ In Comenius' treatise *Pansophiae diatyposis* the individual ascending parts of pansophy have a similar character but different names: *Praeparatoria* – *Idealia* – *Naturalia* – *Artificialia* – *Spiritualia* – *Aeterna* – *Praxin*. Cf. Comenius (1974) 207, 228.

Comenius' masterpiece, the extensive and unfinished *De rerum humanarum emendatione consultatio catholica*, which he began in the mid-1640s and continued to work on up until his death, offers a modified concept. The advanced form of Comenius' pansophy continues to rest on metaphysics, which is materialized in the first of the *pansophic worlds* – *Mundus possibilis*. God (the archetype) inculcated the general principles of the possible world, which represents a complete and organized schema of all human thoughts, ideas, requests, and acts, into the mind of each human being (his own image).¹⁹ The second of the pansophic worlds, *Mundus idealis seu archetypus*, then logically discusses the origin of the general principles and the very source of the human mind – the first and last existence, God. The divine mind is turned not only inwards, but also outwards, thereby creating other worlds, in addition to the possible world inside the human mind.²⁰ The result of divine creativity is the third pansophic world, *Mundus angelicus*, dealing with the first creation (*creatura prima*), spiritual beings.²¹ This creation descent climaxes with the fourth of the pansophic worlds, the physical, visible, material world.

The fundamental principles of *Mundus materialis* – matter (*materia*), spirit (*spiritus vitae*), and light or fire (*lux seu ignis*) – served to create the elementary bodies of the world (heaven, sea, earth), which were gradually filled with the seven levels of material substances.²² These include the elements (*elementa*), vapours (*vapores*), weather phenomena (*meteora*), minerals (*mineralia*), plants (*plantae*), animals (*animal*), and man (*homo*), the most noble of creatures, a being with absolute, unrestricted freedom of action (*primum liberum agens*).²³

Regarding the position of *Mundus materialis* to *Mundus angelicus*, Comenius holds that the Material World – as a visible materialization of all the superior worlds – is ontologically lower and thus *below* the World of Spiritual Beings, namely it is a small globe occupying the centre of a larger globe. In terms of the size and mutual proportion of the two worlds, Comenius points out the fact that *Mundus materialis* and its most noble inhabitants, people, was created to remedy the fall

¹⁹ Comenius (1966) 200, 218.

²⁰ Comenius (1966) 216.

²¹ Comenius (1966) 277.

²² Comenius (1966) 297–298, 317.

²³ Comenius (1966) 317. For more on Comenius' concept of man, which at the peak of the author's career placed an extraordinary emphasis on the freedom of will, see Čížek (2016).

of a third of the angels. It is therefore safe to assume that a third of *Mundus angelicus* was flooded with physicality and the world was made at this very place and to this very extent, visible.²⁴

Let us focus now on the noblest inhabitant of *Mundus materialis*, on man. Comenius believes that freedom of human will and the scope of human creativity are wide enough to enable humans to imitate all the divine ideas, desires, and acts and produce (*producere*) brand new, heretofore non-existent things. Following God, human beings transform all the creatures of *Mundus materialis*, adapting them for different purposes, and even creating entirely new substances of infinite variety, through which they participate in the Creation with the Creator Himself.²⁵

Human activity thus leads to the development of brand new pansophic worlds, which transform and complete the entire universe. Through the human transformation of the Material World, *Mundus artificialis*, the World of Human Art and Craft, emerges.²⁶ The human mind gives rise to *Mundus moralis*, the Moral World. Lastly, human spiritual activities and the connection with God through devotion produce *Mundus spiritualis*, the Spiritual World. Comenius' masterpiece grants humans, as the co-creators of the entire universe, an extraordinary nobility. Man becomes the most perfect representative of God in the visible world and God's partner in the process of creating things and completing the entire universe.²⁷

The partnership between God and man will be crowned through entering the Eternal World, *Mundus aeternus*, where all is returned back to God and placed in a blessed state of eternity (*beatum aeternitatis status*).²⁸ Even in his advanced concept of pansophy, Comenius recalls Creation, in which six worlds (*Mundus idealis*, *Mundus angelicus*, *Mundus materialis*, *Mundus artificialis*, *Mundus moralis* and *Mundus spiritualis*) were built over the six days of creation. The seventh day, the Saturday of the world, should be dedicated to eternal rest – the time of the installation of *Mundus aeternus*.²⁹ Comenius holds that the Eternal World was always included in God, like everything else. For an individual, eternity

²⁴ Comenius (1966), 378–380.

²⁵ Comenius (1966) 421.

²⁶ Comenius (1966) 426.

²⁷ Comenius (1966) 421, 605.

²⁸ Comenius (1966) 731–732.

²⁹ Comenius (1966) 732.

arrives at the time of their death, when the immortal soul transcends into the state of eternity.³⁰ According to Comenius, it is extremely difficult to estimate when the Eternal World will dawn on humanity as a whole, specifically because the human senses and minds are blinded by the existing worlds. He nevertheless believes that eternity will come after the circulation of things ends and when people are multiplied to the maximum number allowed by the fundamental principles of the material world, matter, spirit and light.³¹

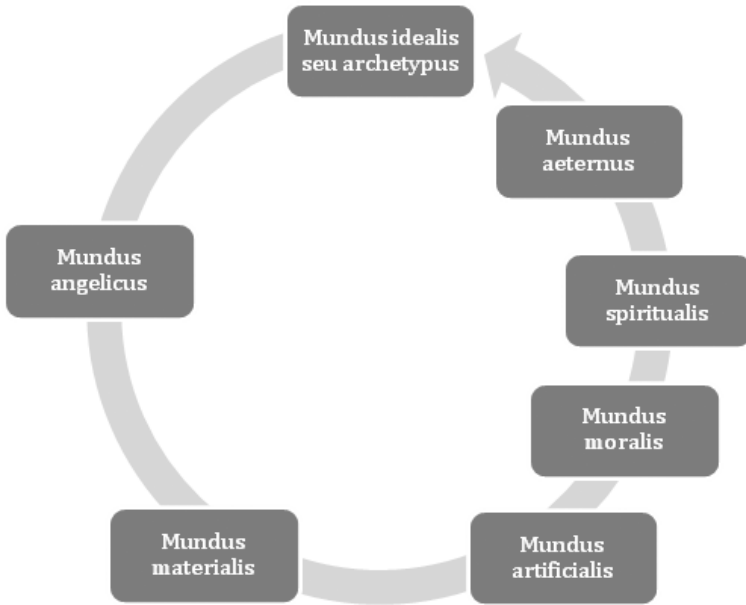


Fig. I Comenius' mature concept of pansophic worlds (according to *Consultatio catholica*).

It is evident that in the 1640s, when Comenius commenced work on his masterpiece *Consultatio catholica*, the initial ascendant organization of the pansophic system had been transformed into a cyclical model. This advanced concept draws on the initial metaphysical treatise on God as the originator of all general principles, i.e. metaphysics. God's work of creation is depicted as a descendance

³⁰ Comenius (1966), 733.

³¹ Comenius (1966) 734.

through *Mundus angelicus* down to *Mundus materialis*, which culminates with the freely acting and creating human being. Human efforts expand, improve and elevate the preceding pansophic worlds up to the Eternal World, where the ontological return to God is to be concluded. *Mundus artificialis*, a world which is unique and original from the perspective of the history of philosophy, plays a central role in the process. This is a world of human work performed by a free man, which inherently completes the universe, shifting it toward its ultimate goal – God.³²

Comenius' modification of the traditional Neo-Platonic paradigm, together with the freedom and activity of man entrusted with the task of co-creating the world, are highly appreciated by historians of philosophy.³³ It has been noted that Comenius was the very first one to introduce such a concept, granting him a special position in Neo-Platonism-inspired philosophy. While his predecessors saw the world-creating power in the unity-multiplying *πρόοδος*, for the Czech thinker it was *ἐπιστροφή*, whose domain is participation in the creation of new worlds. Within Neo-Platonic paradigms, new worlds form through a retreat from the original unity, and thus through the growth of disharmony, while for Comenius human activity is the foundation of a new reality and the beginning of a new harmony.³⁴

In this respect, the Czech scholars Jan Patočka and Pavel Floss have highlighted the Aristotelian attributes of Comenius' concept, as John Amos insists on the idea of the ascent of existence to the fullness of being.³⁵ Although Patočka is convinced of the influence of Comenius' early years, in which the philosopher became acquainted with Aristotle, I am personally of the opinion that Comenius may have been influenced by Francesco Patrizi, whose philosophy is also characterized by a striking and highly original combination of the Neo-Platonic descent and Aristotelian ascent to the first cause. The fact that Patrizi's methodological intention was to proceed from the Aristotelian ascendant concept is confirmed indirectly by the author himself as he names his magnum opus:

³² Červenka (1985), 6–7; Patočka (2003) 118, 172–179.

³³ For example, Červenka (1976) 27; Floss (1994) 77–82; Patočka (2003) 540.

³⁴ Červenka (1970) 160–161, 170–171; Patočka (2003) 172–179.

³⁵ Patočka (1998) 208; Floss (1997) 11–12; Čapková – Červenka – Floss – Kalivoda (1989) 9.

*The New Universal Philosophy, where the Aristotelian method facilitates ascent to the first cause, not based on movement, but based on the light and radiant bodies; application of Patrizi's method generates an insight into all of the divinity; and lastly, following the application of Plato's method, all things are derived from God-Creator.*³⁶

The greatest inspiration for Comenius' mature Neo-Platonic pansophic concept was, however, the work of Tommaso Campanella. The details of Campanella's Neo-Platonic schema of the universe, which Comenius knew (in at least one of its numerous versions), can be best recovered from *Universalis philosophiae seu metaphysicarum rerum iuxta propria dogmata* (published in 1638).³⁷ Campanella discusses five interlinked successive worlds in this treatise, which include *Mundus archetypus*, *Mundus mentalis*, *Mundus mathematicus*, *Mundus materialis* and *Mundus siualis*.

Mundus archetypus is God, the first existence, the source and basis of all the other worlds (*ut intelligas Deum esse intra omnia, & extra omnia, & ante, & post omnia*).³⁸ The next descendance level of Campanella's Neo-Platonic schema of the universe is *Mundus mentalis*, the world of angelic and human minds that participate in the supreme divine power and wisdom.³⁹ *Mundus mathematicus*, the mathematical world, which is space (*spatium universale*), the elementary environment of the existence of all bodies, emerges out of this.⁴⁰ Material bodies constitute the Material world, the corporeal

³⁶ *Nova de universis philosophia, in qua Aristotelica methodo, non per motum, sed per lucem, et lumina, ad primam causam ascenditur. Deinde propria Patricii methodo, tota in contemplationem venit Divinitas: Postremo methodo Platonica, rerum universitatis, a conditore Deo deducitur.* For more on Patrizi's relationship to Aristotelianism, see Ryan (2002) 181; Schiffler (1992) 128. The issue is also addressed by Banić-Pajnić (2001) 194–195. Similarly, the influence of J. Böhme could be considered. Cf. Patočka (1998) 268.

³⁷ Červenka (1979) 118–121. For a list of the versions of Campanella's major metaphysical text, see e.g. Firpo (1940) 119–123. For the availability and general reception of Campanella's work, see e.g. Headley (1997) 78–84, 89–98.

³⁸ Campanella (1638), lib. X, cap. I, art. III, 243.

³⁹ Campanella (1638), lib. X, cap. I, art. IV, 243–244: “*Angeli ergo, & mentes intra Deum sunt, vivunt, & moventur, ante spatium, & corpora*”.

⁴⁰ Campanella (1638), lib. X, cap. I, art. V, 245: “[...] *Mundus Mathematicus, hoc est, spatium, basis existentiae corporum*”.

world, *Mundus materialis (seu corporalis)*.⁴¹ The fifth descendant level, *Mundus situalis*, is the world as we know it (*mundus noster*), where all creations are in their orderly form. This world contains the most diverse existence, ranging from minerals, metals, plants and animals to humans.⁴²

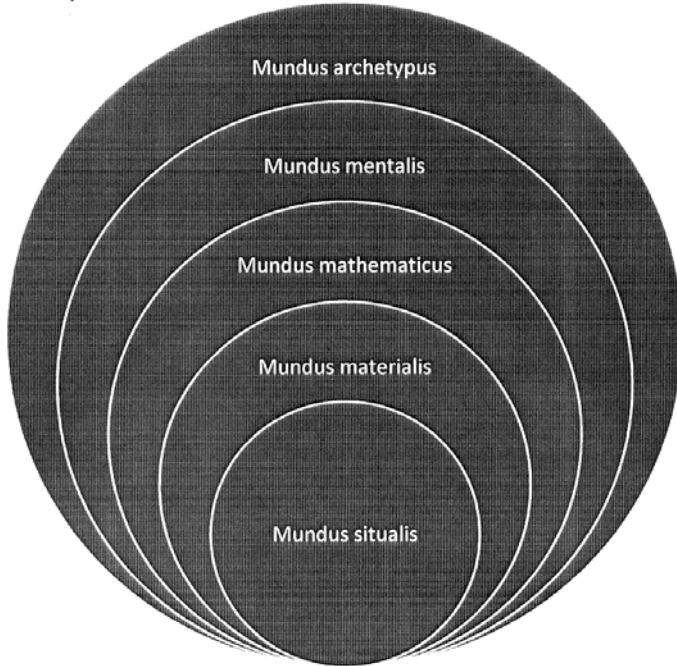


Fig. II Successive worlds according to Tommaso Campanella's *Universalis philosophiae seu metaphysicarum rerum iuxta propria dogmata*.

Although Campanella agrees that the human being is the apex of this world (*epilogus*) and of Creation as a whole, he does not view human creativity as noble and crucial for the culmination of Creation as John Amos Comenius does. Furthermore, Campanella emphasises the fundamental ontological dependency of individual worlds on preceding worlds and primarily on the first, Archetypal World. Compared with Comenius' concept, human participation in the finalization of Creation

⁴¹ Campanella (1638), lib. X, cap. I, art. VI, 245–246.

⁴² Campanella (1638), lib. X, cap. I, art. VII, 246.

is therefore diminished in this respect due to Campanella's decisive emphasis on the divine creative power.⁴³

Reference will therefore be made once again to conclusions reached by the Czech scholars Jaromír Červenka, Jan Patočka and Pavel Floss, who highlighted the fact that although there is no doubt that Comenius' magnum opus was inspired by the philosophy of Tommaso Campanella, Comenius in his *Consultatio catholica* greatly surpasses Campanella's theory of successive worlds. In the 1640s, Comenius revises his initially linear ascendant schema (still present in *Pansophiae praeludium* and *Conatuum pansophicorum dilucidatio*) until it is transformed into a cyclical concept consisting of an initial descent from the Archetypal World to the Material World, and a subsequent ascendance through the World of Human Arts and Crafts to the domain of the eternal. A key role in the schema is played by *Mundus artificialis*, which in the context of the history of Renaissance Neo-Platonism – including the work of Tommaso Campanella – is an utterly unique world built on the unrestricted creative activity of an absolutely freely acting human being.⁴⁴

Bibliography

Primary sources

Campanella, Tommaso. *Universalis philosophiae seu metaphysicarum rerum iuxta propria dogmata*. Paris, 1638.

Comenius, Iohannes Amos. *De rerum humanarum emendatione consultatio catholica*. Prague: Academia, 1966.

Comenius, Iohannes Amos. *Opera omnia* 14. Prague: Academia, 1974.

Comenius, Iohannes Amos. *Opera omnia* 15/II, Prague: Academia, 1989.

Patrizi, Francesco. *Nova de universis philosophia*. Ferrara, 1591.

⁴³ Campanella (1638), lib. X, cap. I, art. VII-VIII, 246–247. Cf. Garin – Pinton (2008) 600–601. Jaromír Červenka points out a similar concept across the entire Neo-Platonic tradition, excluding Comenius. Cf. Červenka (1979) 131.

⁴⁴ Červenka (1979), 118–124, 142–150; Patočka (2003) 173–177 (Patočka however refers to Descartes as another possible influence, see *ibid.* 77); Floss (1997), 6–7, 11–12.

Secondary sources

- Banić-Pajnić, Erna. *Petrićev put: Od kritike Aristotela do pobožne filozofije*. Zagreb: Institut za filozofiju, 2001.
- Čapková, Dagmar, Jaromír Červenka, Pavel Floss, and Robert Kalivoda. "The Philosophical Significance of the Work of Comenius." *Acta Comeniana* XXXII, no. 8 (1989): 5–16.
- Červenka, Jaromír. *Die Naturphilosophie des Johann Amos Comenius*. Prague: Academia, 1970.
- "Ontologické základy Komenského filosofických a pedagogických názorů" [Ontological Basis of Comenius' Philosophical and Paedagogical Views]. *Studia Comeniana et Historica* VI, no. 13 (1976): 25–31.
- "Die Weltenschichten bei Campanella und Comenius." *Acta Comeniana* XXVIII, no. 14/1 (1979): 117–157.
- "Mundus Possibilis (Ein Versuch der Analyse des Eintrittsgradus der Pansophie)." *Acta Comeniana* XXX, no. 6 (1985): 5–24.
- Čížek, Jan. *The Conception of Man in the Works of John Amos Comenius*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 2016.
- Firpo, Luigi. *Bibliografia degli scritti di Tommaso Campanella*. Torino: Bona, 1940.
- Floss, Pavel. "Proces divinizace světského a dílo J. A. Komenského" [The Divinisation of the Profane and the Work of John Amos Comenius]. *Studia Comeniana et Historica* XXIV, no. 51 (1994): 77–81.
- "Grundriss der Philosophie des Johann Amos Comenius." *Studia Comeniana et Historica* XXVII, no. 57-58 (1997): 5–35.
- Garin, Eugenio, and Giorgio A. Pinton. *History of Italian Philosophy*. Vol. 1. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008.
- Headley, John M. *Tommaso Campanella and the Transformation of the World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- Neval, Daniel Alexander. *Comenius' Pansophie: Die dreifache Offenbarung Gottes in Schrift, Natur und Vernunft. Unvollendete Habilitationsschrift*. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2007.
- Odložilík, Otakar. "Z pansofických studií J. A. Komenského" [Comenius' Pansophic Studies], *Časopis Matice Moravské* 52 (1928): 127–159.

Patočka, Jan. *Komeniologické studie I* [Comeniological Studies I], Prague: OIKOYMENH, 1997.

----- *Komeniologické studie II* [Comeniological Studies II], Prague: OIKOYMENH, 1998.

----- *Komeniologické studie III* [Comeniological Studies III], Prague: OIKOYMENH, 2003.

Ryan, Eugene E. "The Panaugia of Franciscus Patritius: From the Light of Experience to the First Light." In *Francesco Patrizi, filosofo platonico nel crepuscolo del Rinascimento*, edited by Castelli, Patrizia, 181-195. Firenze: Olschki, 2002.

Schiffler, Ljerka. *Humanizam bez granica: Hrvatska filozofija u europskom obzoru*, Zagreb: Hrvatsko filozofsko društvo, 1992.