With good reason Wessel Gansfort can be considered one of the better representatives of the philosophical and intellectual climate of the fifteenth century. The fifteenth century witnessed a strong and bitter divide between two different ways of thought (viae), the so-called ‘Wegestreit’ between on the one hand the nominales, also called moderni, and on the other the reales, also called antiqui, who in turn were divided into several groups: the Thomists, the Formalists (or Scotists) and the Albertists. What lies at the heart of this difference of opinion is the status of the universals, that is to say the question either whether the universals in one way or another may be found to exist as common natures in reality or even to have priority in reality — as was the opinion of the realists — or whether the universals function solely as nouns, concepts or terms in the mind, with the help of which the mind grasps and organizes external reality, which in itself exists only of singular, individual, and thus mutually independent, beings — as was the opinion of the nominalists. This point exerted its influence in many other domains of philosophy and theology. We know that people in the fifteenth century were themselves aware of this division and that it led to different views on what a science should be, on the relation between reality, knowledge and language, and that it thus led to different systems of philosophy and theology and even to, so to speak, different worldviews. This ‘Wegestreit’ had influence on the organization of universities, it was an issue with which princes and kings occupied themselves and on which they took positions; it could be decisive for academic careers and careers in general, and it could even, together with other points, be decisive for matters of life and death.¹ We know that Gansfort converted himself from

¹ For this ‘Wegestreit’ and its significance, see especially Gilbert, ‘Ockham, Wyclif, and the “via moderna”,’ and Gabriel, ‘“Via antiqua” and “via moderna” and the migration of Paris students and masters to German universities’ in Antiqui und Moderni; also Courtenay, ‘Antiqui and Moderni in Late Medieval Thought’, and the articles by Trinkaus, Oberman and Gilbert in the same volume of Journal of the History of Ideas 48 (1987).
realist into nominalist, and that in this way he combined in his own intellectual development both positions that were of primordial importance for the development of philosophy and intellectual life in his times. In this paper I will examine Gansfort’s views with respect to the divide between realism and nominalism.

First it is important to take a closer look into the historical data we possess on Gansfort’s intellectual development. As is known, the most pertinent information is given by Gansfort himself in his letter to Master Jacob Hoek, which dates from the end of his life. Here Gansfort states that he is willing to correct his views in order to search for the truth of faith, and as an illustration of this he tells us that he went to Paris in an attempt to convert the famous formalists Henry of Someren and Nicholas of Utrecht to his own realism. He himself, however, went over to formalism, but having noticed that it contained even more errors than realism, within a year he changed over to nominalism.\(^2\) Gansfort’s biographer, M. van Rhijn, has shown that these events must have taken place somewhere between 1457 and 1460.\(^3\) From this it is clear that Gansfort up to these years had considered himself and had been a realist. This is corroborated further by the fact that he had worked in the via antiqua at the university of Heidelberg.\(^4\)

In connection with this information some observations have to be made. The first is that we know that during his studies at the university of Cologne Gansfort was a member of the Bursa Laurentiana.\(^5\) This Bursa was the home and stronghold of the Albertists or the via Alberti and it originated from the activities of Heymeric de Campo, one of the leading Albertists and, at any rate, the most important Albertist in Cologne. It is a serious deficiency of the older literature on Gansfort — and even of

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\(^3\) See Van Rhijn, *Wessel Gansfort*, 78–79.

\(^4\) *Ibid.*, 76.

\(^5\) *Ibid.*, 48 (referring to the ‘Vita Hardenbergi’) and Bijlage A, Ic, VI (referring to ‘Kurze Geschichte des Laurentianer Gymnasiums’).