

## CHAPTER 2

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### Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464): Platonism at the Dawn of Modernity

#### THE AMBIGUOUS FIGURE OF NICHOLAS OF CUSA: LAST MEDIEVAL OR FIRST MODERN?

Although Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464),<sup>1</sup> or ‘Cusanus’, is still largely ignored in English-language histories of medieval philosophy,<sup>2</sup> this papal diplomat, eventually cardinal, eclectic, humanist scholar and ardent Neoplatonist was one of the greatest intellects of the fifteenth century. Primarily because of his dialectical

<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Krebs was born in 1401 in Kues, a town on the Moselle river in Germany. He studied at the universities of Heidelberg (1416–1417) and then Padua (1417–1423), where, registered for law, he spent 6 years studying mathematics, astronomy and physics. There he became friendly with his future sponsor Julian Cesarini (1398–1444) and with the mathematician and astronomer Paul Tuscanelli (1397–1482). Upon graduation in 1423, he went to Rome and then, in 1425, enrolled in the University of Cologne to study philosophy and theology prior to his ordination as a priest (c.1430). The dominant tradition of Cologne came from Albertus Magnus and Heymericus de Campo, also known as Heimericus van den Welde (1395–1460), with whom Cusanus probably studied in 1425–1426. Subsequently Nicholas became active in Church politics, attended the Council of Basel, and in 1437 went on a mission to Constantinople in an attempt to reconcile the Greek and Roman churches. From 1438 to 1448 he was papal envoy to Germany. His first published work *De docta ignorantia* (hereafter ‘DDI’) appeared in 1440. He became Cardinal in 1446 and bishop of Brixen in 1450. He died in 1464. See Jasper Hopkins, ‘Nicholas of Cusa’, in Joseph R. Strayer (ed.), *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1987), vol. 9, pp. 122–125. Citations from Cusanus’, in E. Hoffmann and R. Klibansky (eds), *De docta ignorantia* will be from Nicholas of Cusa, *De docta ignorantia* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1932), *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance. A Translation and Appraisal of De Docta Ignorantia*, trans. Jasper Hopkins, 2nd edn. (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> For instance, there are but half a dozen scant references to him, and those chiefly to his political writings, in Anthony Kenny, Norman Kretzmann and Jan Pinborg (eds), *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982).

reflections on the nature of the infinite, including speculations about the nature of the cosmos, he has been called the ‘gatekeeper’ of the modern age.<sup>3</sup> This towering and ambiguous thinker was not an isolated intellectual, indeed, he engaged in vigorous debates especially on matters to do with reconciliation between various Church groupings and even rival faiths (Christianity and Islam). Furthermore, although in some respects he clearly follows on from Meister Eckhart (and Thierry of Chartres), and subsequently influenced Giordano Bruno, Copernicus (who also studied at the University of Padua), and, albeit tangentially, René Descartes, he has no clearly identifiable intellectual precursor or successor.

In many respects, Cusanus is a typical Renaissance Humanist scholar with a keen interest in mathematics, cosmology and astronomy (his astronomical instruments are still preserved in the library at Kues). Indeed, in 1469, about 5 years after Cusanus’ death, his former secretary Giovanni Andrea de’ Bussi (1417–1475) published a eulogy wherein he called Cusanus the most learned of men and noted that he was interested in the recently invented art of printing. It makes sense to link him to Gutenberg (1399–1468), an exact contemporary. Indeed, it has been suggested that Cusanus was responsible for introducing printing to Italy from Germany.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, through Cardinal Orsini, Cusanus’ name became familiar to the Italian Humanists, and his name appears in correspondence between Poggio Bracciolini and Guarino Veronese (1426–1427).<sup>5</sup> Marsilio Ficino similarly alludes (albeit only once) to ‘some speculations of Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa’ (*quoddam speculationes Nicolai Cusii Cardinalis*) in a letter of 1489 to Martinus Urianus. Pico Della Mirandola, too, was aware of Cusanus and expressed a wish to visit the latter’s library at Cues.<sup>6</sup> Nicholas of Cusa may also be viewed as a figure of the Northern German Renaissance, associated with Cologne, where the impact of Meister Eckhart still lingered, and with Heidelberg, then a centre of nominalism and conciliarism under the rectorship of Marsilious of Inghen. In fact, he moved between this Northern world and Renaissance Italy, familiar with both intellectual terrains.

Influential twentieth-century European scholars, notably Ernst Cassirer,<sup>7</sup> Alexandre Koyré, Hans-Georg Gadamer,<sup>8</sup> Hans Blumenberg,<sup>9</sup> Werner

<sup>3</sup> R. Haubst, ‘Nikolaus von Kues—‘Pfoertner der neuen Zeit’, *Kleine Schriften der Cusanus-Gesellschaft* 12 (1988), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> See, ‘Cusanus’ Contemporaries. II. Giovanni Andrea Bussi (1417–1475)’, in *American Cusanus Society Newsletter* vol. X. no. 1 (June 1993), pp. 9–11.

<sup>5</sup> See Edmond Vansteenberghe, *Le Cardinal Nicolas de Cues* (Paris, 1920; reprinted Frankfurt: Minerva Verlag, 1963), Chap. 2. This letter is translated in Phyllis W.G. Gordon’s *Two Renaissances Book Hunters: The Letters of Poggio Bracciolini to Nicolaus de Cusa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), pp. 115–116.

<sup>6</sup> See Gain, *Pico* (Florence, 1937), p. 36 n.1.

<sup>7</sup> E. Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neuen Zeit* (Berlin, 1922), vol 1, pp. 32–61.

<sup>8</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, ‘Nikolaus von Kues in modernen Denken’, in *Nicolaus Cusanus agli inizi del mondo moderno* (Florence: Sansoni, 1970), pp. 39–48.

<sup>9</sup> H. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).

Beierwaltes,<sup>10</sup> Karsten Harries<sup>11</sup> and Louis Dupré,<sup>12</sup> have lauded Cusanus as, in one way or another, a harbinger of modernity. His alleged ‘modernity’ is attested by his interest in mathematics and relative motion, and specifically his conception of space and the cosmos. In fact, in this last regard, Cusanus was an adherent neither of the Ptolemaic nor (in advance) of the Copernican heliocentric theory, rather he had ‘decentred’ the universe and thus prepared the way for the infinite space of Newton and modern physics. In his ground-breaking study, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* the noted Galileo scholar, Alexandre Koyré, credits Cusanus, ‘the last great philosopher of the dying Middle Ages’, with being the first to break with the medieval conception of the cosmos as a finite, closed, hierarchical world,<sup>13</sup> and records that the Cusan was recognised as such by leading figures on the cusp of the modern age, such as Kepler, Bruno and Descartes.

Koyré’s claim is that Cusanus anticipated Copernicus and modern science by conceiving of the universe as *infinite*. Indeed, it was precisely in this regard that Descartes took note of Cusanus. In his well-known letter of 6 June 1647 to Père Chanut, Descartes refers to Queen Christina of Sweden’s comments on the supposed size of the universe. Descartes writes:

In the first place I recollect that the Cardinal of Cusa and many other doctors have supposed the world to be infinite without ever being censured by the Church; on the contrary, to represent God’s works as very great is thought to be a way of doing him honour. And my opinion is not so difficult to accept as theirs, because I do not say that the world is infinite but only that it is indefinite. There is quite a notable difference between the two: for we cannot say that something is infinite without a reason to prove this such as we can give only in the case of God; but we can say that a thing is indefinite simply if we have no reason to prove that the thing has bounds.<sup>14</sup>

Descartes argues that the conception of matter as extension does not convey the idea of boundaries. Since matter cannot even be conceived as having bounds, he designates it as ‘indefinite’:

But I cannot deny on that account that there may be some reasons which are known to God though incomprehensible to me; that is why I do not say outright that it is infinite. (*AT* V 52; *CSMK* 320)

<sup>10</sup> W. Beierwaltes, *Identität und Differenz* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1980).

<sup>11</sup> K. Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> L. Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> A. Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1957), p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Descartes, Letter to Chanut, 6 June 1647, cited in Descartes, in Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (eds), *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 11 vols (Paris: Vrin, 1964–1974), vol. v (1996), p. 52 (hereafter *AT* followed by the volume and page number). The letter is translated in John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch and Anthony Kenny (eds), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 3. *The Correspondence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 319–320 (hereafter: *CSMK*).

Descartes represents Cusanus as already maintaining that the universe is infinite. While it is certainly true that Cusanus opposed the standard medieval view of the universe as a hierarchy of spheres enclosed within one another (since hierarchical ascent and descent is always limited to the finite), Koyré has shown that Cusanus did not hold that the universe was *actually* infinite, but rather maintains that it was ‘indeterminate’ (*interminatum*), lacking precision and hence definition. Indeed it is indeterminate for the good Platonic reason that it is full of mutability and cannot be the object of precise knowledge—‘For otherness (*alteritas*) is identical with mutability’ (*mutabilitas*, DDI I.7.18). The universe is, in Cusanus’ strange terminology, ‘contractedly infinite’ (DDI II.4.113). It does not have a fixed circumference (DDI II.11.156). God, on the other hand, is ‘negatively infinite’. It is important to emphasise, then, that Cusanus is interested in the infinite not so much as a characteristic of the physical universe (since it has that character derivatively or as a result of contraction), but precisely as a negative theological attribute of the transcendent God that presents paradoxes and conundrums for finite minds. For Cusanus’ interest in the infinity of the divine is always matched by his stress on the finitude and limitation of the human and created orders and their irrevocable distance from the divine (the universe is ‘infinitely lower’ than God as maximum, DDI II.4.114).

It is Cusanus’ emphasis on the restricted finitude of human knowledge as well as its insatiable desire for knowing (DDI III.12.259) that has led inevitably to comparisons with Kant. In fact, however, it is far more accurate to see Cusanus as following the Pauline and Augustinian tradition that sees all human reasoning as limited, or as Cusanus would put it ‘conjectural’, that is, perspectival. Cusanus holds, for instance, that sight gives things from one side and under a certain aspect (*De coniecturis* I Ch. 11) and such perspectivalism brings a certain limitation and ‘otherness’ (*alteritas*) to our knowledge. The challenge, for Cusanus, is how to overcome this ‘otherness’ in order for the mind to achieve unity with its object, so that the mind can be receptive to the object as such. In theological terms, of course, such an epistemic goal has to be seen in the context of the overall theological aim of Christian Platonists to become one with the infinite One, or, as Cusanus puts it in his dedicatory letter to Cardinal Cesarini, that ‘intellect may raise itself to that Simplicity where contradictories coincide (DDI III para. 264). This unification is achieved not by promethean overcoming of the human but precisely by a dynamic, dialectic meditation on the essential finitude of the human.

#### CUSANUS AS SEPTIC: LEARNED IGNORANCE AS SACRED IGNORANCE

In this respect it is important to bear in mind that Cusanus’ immediate successors generally treated him not so much as a Humanist reformer but rather as a *sceptic* who emphasised the limitation and failure of human knowledge of God and of the world. Indeed Cusanus’ very conception of *docta ignorantia* (‘learned ignorance’), which, according to his own words is an ‘instruction in ignorance’ (*doctrina ignorantiae*, DDI II.1.91), ‘unites all methods by which it is possible

to approach the truth', may be interpreted in a sceptical manner. According to Hans Blumenberg's interpretation, Cusanus' real contribution is his recognition that it is precisely the self-restriction of knowledge that leads to epistemic advance. Blumenberg writes:

It is a constitutive element of the modern age that it expands through restriction, achieves progressions through critical reduction: Renunciation of the principle of teleology discloses for the first time the full efficacy of the application of the causal category to nature; the elimination of the question of substance, and its replacement by the universal application of quantity, makes mathematical natural science possible; and renunciation of the phantom of the requirement of absolute accuracy made possible an exactitude that can set itself tolerances for its inaccuracy. The knowledge of the modern age was decisively rendered possible by a knowledge of what we cannot know.<sup>15</sup>

Blumenberg sees Cusanus as belonging with the moderns here since knowledge of one's ignorance, or a certain self-circumscription of one's epistemic claims until they are attested by vigorous method, is a central element in the modern idea of science.<sup>16</sup>

For Cusanus, philosophy is a kind of methodological or cultivated ignorance, even a 'sacred ignorance' (*sacra ignorantia*, DDI II.2.98). His starting point is self-aware ignorance: 'the more he knows that he is unknowing, the more learned he will be' (DDI I.1.4). He frequently makes use of the notion (from Plato and Aristotle) of philosophy beginning with curiosity, wonder or amazement (*admiratio*).<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Cusanus declares, in sympathy with Socrates, that in a certain sense 'to know is to be ignorant' (*scire est ignorare*, *Idiota de Mente* I.2; see also DDI I.1.4), and he advances the radical—ultimately Platonic—claim that exact knowledge is an impossible goal: 'precise truth inapprehensible' (DDI I.2.8). Desiring to know what we do not know leads us to learned ignorance (DDI I.1.4).

Clearly, following on from Dionysius and Augustine, Cusanus is actually promoting a kind of not-knowing which is the highest form of wisdom, but it is easy to understand why a more secular age could read him as a sceptic. According to the ninth-century Christian Neoplatonist John Scottus Eriugena (familiar to Cusanus), for instance, God 'is better known by not knowing, his ignorance is true wisdom' (*qui melius nesciendo scitur, cuius ignorantia vera est sapientia*, *Periphyseon* I.510b), where Eriugena is invoking a phrase found in St. Augustine's *De Ordine* XVI.44, 'God is better known by not knowing' (*Deus qui melius scitur nesciendo*).<sup>18</sup> Cusanus' *docta ignorantia* is quite deliberately attempts to continue this tradition (and indeed to read it back to Plato and Pythagoras). In fact, in his

<sup>15</sup> H. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, p. 500.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 499.

<sup>17</sup> See Cusanus, *Idiota. De mente*. 1.1, p. 41. For the claim that philosophy begins in wonder, see Plato, *Theaetetus* 155d and Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1,2,982b. See also Cusanus, *De coniecturis* 2, 11.

<sup>18</sup> See St. Augustine, *De Ordine*, in R. Jolivet (ed.), *Oeuvres de saint Augustin. Première série. Oposcules* vol. iv. *Dialogues philosophiques* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1948), p. 438.

*Apologia doctae ignorantiae*,<sup>19</sup> Cusanus credits Augustine with the very phrase ‘learned ignorance’:

But Aurelius Augustine—expounding the word of Paul in *Romans* 8 (‘We do not know what to ask for’)—declared, after other things, how it is that we have learned ignorance: ‘We know that what we seek exists; but we do not know what kind of thing it is. We have this ‘learned ignorance,’ so to speak, through the Spirit, who helps our infirmity.’ And after a few [other statements]: ‘Since Paul says that the Spirit implores with unutterable groanings, he indicates that the unknown thing is both unknown and not altogether unknown. For if it were altogether unknown, it would not be sought with groaning.’ Augustine [said] these things. (*Apologia* 13)

The background to this learned ignorance is of course St. Paul and his supposed follower Dionysius the Areopagite, but inevitably comparisons have been made with Descartes’ own methodological procedure of doubting. But, while historians of modern philosophy are more or less united in the view that Descartes revolutionised philosophy with his turn to the *cogito*, thereby inaugurating the epistemological turn of modern philosophy, Cusanus’ equally original speculations on the finitude and limitation of human knowledge represent a no less important strand, even if it became, in the words of one commentator, ‘the road not taken’. Cusanus remains, therefore, a transitional figure between the Italian and Northern Renaissance, between the old and new theologies, and, more generally, between the medieval and modern worldviews. While his dialectical treatment of theological issues is highly original, his intent was surely quite traditional. Even the historian of ideas Hans Blumenberg concedes that Cusanus is—paradoxically, given the novelties in his writing—endeavouring to maintain the continuance of the medieval Christian worldview, attempting to hold together in one great system God, the universe and humankind,<sup>20</sup> while at the same time challenging what he regarded as the naïve rationalism of Scholasticism by exaggerating the transcendence of the divine. Cusanus’ primary aim was to maintain the unity of philosophy and theology.

In the remainder of this paper I plan to explore not Cusanus’ alleged anticipations of modern science and philosophy,<sup>21</sup> but rather on his exemplification of the Christian Platonic tradition in which he was steeped, and which he approached in a strikingly original manner. I shall focus on Cusanus’ first and

<sup>19</sup> See Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa’s Debate with John Wenck. A Translation and Appraisal of De Ignota Litteratura and Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1984), esp. pp. 97–118. Hereafter *Apologia* followed by the paragraph number and the page number of the Hopkins translation.

<sup>20</sup> H. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, p. 484.

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of Cusanus’ relation to modern philosophy, see Dermot Moran, ‘Cusanus and Modern Philosophy’, in James Hankins (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

best known work his *De docta ignorantia* (1440), often seen as his most important philosophical contribution.<sup>22</sup>

As Cusanus' *docta ignorantia* occasioned controversy at the time, towards the end of this paper I shall examine briefly Cusanus' controversy with the tradition of school Aristotelianism, exemplified in his day by the theologian Johannes Wenck, who wrote a rebuttal of Cusanus' work to which Cusanus himself replied. The Platonist Cusanus was often quite dismissive of the Neo-Aristotelian pedantry of his day (see for instance his criticism of the Peripatetics on the nature of the forms at DDI II.9.147).<sup>23</sup> His Heidelberg opponent John Wenck acknowledges this when he writes of Cusanus: 'this man cares little for the sayings of Aristotle' (*Ignota*, 22; Hopkins, p. 23). In his own *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* (1449), Cusanus himself expresses regret that 'the Aristotelian sect' now prevails (*Apologia* 6).<sup>24</sup> The exchanges between Cusanus and Wenck have generated some interesting critical commentary. For Hans Blumenberg the debate manifests the tensions inherent in the medieval world. For him, Cusanus is proposing an essentially new procedure, proceeding through ignorance and 'conjecture', whereas Wenck takes a more traditional stance that cannot see how progress in knowledge can be made precisely through lack of understanding! My aim will be more modest: to discuss this clash with Aristotelianism as a way of highlighting the distinctive nature of Cusanus' Platonism. I will suggest here that Cusanus' supposed new procedure is actually a very original application of the traditional *via negativa*. If it led to the self-limitation and self-circumscription of the modern epistemological subject then this is a direct consequence of a certain Platonic negative dialectic. But first, I want to say a word about Cusanus' formation as a philosopher and a Platonist.

#### CUSANUS AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION

Cusanus' busy life as a diplomat and in philosophy meant that he was first and foremost a dilettante in mathematics, philosophy and the sciences (he had an interest in optics and mechanics). Apart from his year at the University of

<sup>22</sup> The title *docta ignorantia* is ambiguous. It can mean a *cultivated* ignorance, i.e. one which has to be learned, or a *learned* or *wise* ignorance, one which bestows wisdom or learnedness. Both interpretations have been defended by scholars, and indeed both meanings are present in the English words 'learned' and 'learnéd'. Cusanus claimed that the 'learned ignorance' of the title was discovered by him in a 'Road to Damascus' type experience, while travelling at sea between Constantinople and Venice sometime between 27 November 1437 and 8 February 1438. From then until his death in 1464, the explication of the doctrine of 'learned ignorance' in ever new ways became Cusanus' central philosophical endeavour.

<sup>23</sup> The late Scholasticism of Cusanus' day was already deeply imbued with Nominalism, which he had encountered possibly at Deventer (where he may have schooled) and certainly at Heidelberg.

<sup>24</sup> At times Cusanus can be somewhat disparaging about the Stagirite, suggesting that Aristotle sought to show his greatness by refuting others (DDI I.11.32). On the other hand, he regards Aristotle as 'very profound' (DDI I.1.4) and says he was right to say that the entire world divides up into substance and accident (DDI I.18.53). Cusanus' syncretism led him to read all the great minds as in essential agreement with one another and the truth despite apparent differences.

Cologne, he was mostly self-taught in philosophy, yet he had a deep familiarity and sympathy with the Platonic tradition, from the actual dialogues of Plato (certain of which he possessed), through Proclus and Dionysius, right down to Robert Grosseteste and Meister Eckhart. He wants to harness the great scientific and artistic discoveries of his day, from the mathematics of infinite quantities to the discovery of perspective in painting, to express the ancient wisdom to be found in the Platonic tradition concerning the transcendence and incomprehensibility of the divine One.

Cusanus was exceedingly well informed, and often at first hand, on the Platonic tradition. He was an eager collector of manuscripts, eventually owning about 300, including many works by Platonists and their Christian followers. He owned Bruni's translations of Plato's *Phaedo*, *Crito*, *Apology* and *Seventh Letter*, as well as translations of the *Republic*, *Laws*, *Phaedrus* and *Parmenides*. He possessed manuscripts by Origen, Gregory Nazianzus, Basil, Augustine, Ambrose, Albertus Magnus, the *liber de causis*, Avicenna's metaphysics, as well as Calcidius' *Commentary on the Timaeus*, Moerbeke's translation of Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, and Proclus' *Commentary on the Parmenides* as well as Grosseteste's translations of Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* and *Celestial Hierarchy*. Unusually for the time, he had copies of part of Eriugena's *Periphyseon*. He possessed a copy of Petrus Balbus' translation of the *Platonic Theology*. He also owned several works by Eckhart including his Genesis commentary and *Commentary on the Book of Wisdom* (annotated by Cusanus himself). He was one of the first scholars to be able to set these works into a distinct tradition and therefore to systematise the Platonic tradition up to the Renaissance.

By temperament Cusanus is always Platonist and even Pythagorean. He speaks of the 'divine Plato' (DDI I.17.48; *Apologia* 10).<sup>25</sup> Pythagoras is 'the first philosopher both in name and in fact' (DDI I.11.32). The Platonists spoke 'sensibly' about the Forms (DDI II.9.148); the *Parmenides* opened a 'way to God'. His reasoning is especially close to that of Proclus in arguing from contradictions to the inexpressibility of the One, a position which he found encapsulated in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius ('the greatest of the theologians', *De li non aliud* 14). Cusanus speaks of 'our' Dionysius the Areopagite (*De beryllo* 12),<sup>26</sup> the 'disciple of the Apostle Paul' (*De beryllo* 11), 'that greatest seeker of divine things' (*maximus ille divinorum scrutator*, DDI I.16.43), 'who assigned God many names' (*De beryllo* 46). Indeed, Cusanus cites Dionysius liberally from his earliest to his last works (e.g. *De li non aliud*), although, somewhat puzzlingly, he later said that he had not yet read Dionysius (*Apologia* 12) at the time of

<sup>25</sup> For a full list of Cusanus' Platonic references, see Markus L. Fuehrer, 'Cusanus Platonicus. References to the Term *Platonici* in Nicholas of Cusa,' in Stephen Gersh and Maarten Hoenen (eds), *The Platonic Tradition in the Middle Ages* (New York and Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), pp. 345–370.

<sup>26</sup> See F. Edward Cranz, 'Nicolaus of Cusa and Dionysius Areopagita', and 'Cusanus' Use of Pseudo-Dionysius,' in F. Edward Cranz, *Nicholas of Cusa and the Renaissance*, Thomas M. Izbicki and Gerald Christianson (eds) (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 2000), pp. 109–136 and 137–148.



writing *De docta ignorantia* (1440).<sup>27</sup> Cusanus regularly characterises his own Platonism as stemming from Dionysius and behind him from Plato. He also draws on Dionysius' commentators, including his Latin translators, especially Eriugena (who he calls 'Johannes Scotigena'),<sup>28</sup> Albertus Magnus' *Commentary on the Divine Names*,<sup>29</sup> Robert Grosseteste (whose translations of Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* and *Celestial Hierarchy* he owned in manuscript), Thomas Gallus and Meister Eckhart.

Cusanus reads Dionysius as a Christian practitioner of *dialectic* in the tradition stemming from Plato's *Parmenides*.<sup>30</sup> He quotes Proclus' *Commentary on Parmenides*<sup>31</sup> to the effect that Plato denied that predications can be made of the first principle, just as Dionysius prefers negative to affirmative theology (*De beryllo* 12). Cusanus writes: 'The great Dionysius imitates Plato' (*De beryllo* 27) and in his *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* (1449): 'The divine Dionysius imitated Plato to such an extent that he is quite frequently found to have cited Plato's words in series'.<sup>32</sup>

Of course, as a deeply orthodox Catholic, Cusanus is fully aware that certain doctrines of classical Platonism (the doctrine of the world soul, discussed at DDI II.9.149, of fate, of the eternity of the world, and so on) are in conflict

<sup>27</sup> Yet Dionysius is cited several times in the *De docta ignorantia* and in the *Apologia*. Cusanus, in fact, refers to Dionysius twice in his *De Concordantia Catholica* of 1433, but these references might have been drawn from other sources.

<sup>28</sup> See Werner Beierwaltes, 'Eriugena und Cusanus', in *Eriugena. Grundzüge seines Denkens* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1994), pp. 266–312. Besides Eriugena's translations of *Dionysius*, Cusanus, at the very least, was familiar with *Periphyseon* Book 1, a manuscript of which (British Museum Codex Additivus 11035) he owned and annotated. He was also familiar with the *Clavis Physicae* of Honorius Augustodunensis (Paris Bib. Nat. cod. lat. 6734), essentially a compendium of Eriugenian excerpts, as well as the homily *Vox Spiritualis* (at that time listed under the name of Origen but now attributed to Eriugena).

<sup>29</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Super Dionysium de Divinis Nominibus, Opera Omnia*, vols 36 and 37 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1972), cited in Cusanus, *De Beryllo*, 17.

<sup>30</sup> Paradoxically, Cusanus anticipates the great Renaissance scholar Lorenzo Valla, who eventually unmasked the pseudonymous nature of the Dionysian corpus, with his independent recognition of the close doctrinal proximity between Proclus and Dionysius. For Cusanus, however, it was simply that Proclus and Dionysius were both sages who belonged to the same tradition and knew the higher truth.

<sup>31</sup> See Proclus, in V. Cousin (ed.), *In Platonis Parmenidem*, VI 1074, trans. *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, trans. Glenn Morrow and John Dillon (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 427: 'So then it is more proper to reveal the incomprehensible and indefinable cause which is the One through negations' (Cousin 1074).

<sup>32</sup> Wenck's *De Ignota Litteratura* ('On Ignorant Learning' or 'On Unknown Learning') was first edited by E. Vansteenberghe in 1912 in *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters* using text from the Mainz municipal library, Codex 190 (another one since discovered at Trier Municipal Library, Codex 228/1467). Jasper Hopkins has made new edition based on the two manuscripts, both date from middle of fifteenth century and are independent of each other. See Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Debate with John Wenck. A Translation and Appraisal of De Ignota Litteratura and Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1984), esp. pp. 97–118. Hereafter *Apologia* followed by the paragraph number and the page number of the Hopkins translation. The reference here is *Apologia*, 10, Hopkins, p. 49.

with Christianity and he takes issue with the *platonici* on many of these points. For instance, he criticises Plato for assuming that creation arises from divine necessity rather than from divine freewill (*De beryllo* 38). On the other hand, he offers an interpretation of the world-soul that makes it identical with God. The Platonic tradition in his larger sense is always explicitly presented as his own heritage and its primary importance is theological in that it recognises that God is an infinite transcendent One.

#### EXPRESSING THE INFINITY OF THE DIVINE

As I have been stressing, Nicholas' philosophical project consists primarily of a series of attempts to do justice to the *infinity* of the divine and to bring human beings to recognise that their lack of certain knowledge about the universe is not a contingent failing but embedded in the uncertain and inexact nature of creation itself. This is done through an exploitation of various *aporiai* and paradoxes that arise in attempting to express the infinite superabundance of the divine One in the determinate and finite language of the created order. Cusanus' tactic is to invent different conceits or hypotheses as vehicles for conceiving in metaphorical fashion this infinite and transcendent God, who is above all human comprehension.

Throughout his writings, Cusanus offers interesting and novel conceptions of the infinite God. In one sense, he is following the old theological tradition, found especially in Dionysius' *Divine Names*, of seeking appropriate names for God. In his *De docta ignorantia*, for instance, God is characterised as the 'Absolute Maximum' and 'infinite unity' (*unitas infinita*, DDI I.5.14). Elsewhere, Cusanus will explore other characterisations of God as 'the same' (*idem*), 'itness' (*iditas*, DDI I.9.25) or as 'not other' (*non aliud*). In *De possest*, for instance, Cusanus will combine two verbal forms, 'to be able' or 'can be' (*posse*) and 'is' (*est*), to show that God is actually all that is possible. In other words, God is the actualisation of all possibilities. In *De apice theoriae* 28, God is understood as the 'power of powers' (*fortitudo fortium et virtus virtutum*). In *De venatione sapientiae*, Cusanus says that God is 'prior to the difference between act and potency' (*ante differentiam actus et potentiae*). These designations for the divine are supposed to both illumine and to perplex. Through the joint actions of insight and perplexity, the contemplator arrives at 'wise ignorance' concerning God.

For Cusanus, the infinity of God is a first truth that is even taught by 'sacred ignorance' or negative theology: 'Now according to the theology of negation, there is not found in God anything other than infinity' (DDI I. 26.88).<sup>33</sup> The 'theology of negation', to which Cusanus here refers, is the tradition of the Christian followers of Proclus, chiefly Dionysius the Areopagite and his commentators, including Johannes Scottus Eriugena. Cusanus maintains that affirmative theology, although a necessary starting point, contains the danger that it will

<sup>33</sup> Cusanus' treatment of 'infinity', as a chief attribute of the divine, is akin to Eriugena's belief that 'nothing' (*nihilum*), as a name for God, is sanctioned by Scripture.

reduce God to a creature, and hence lead to idolatry (DDI I.26.86). Negative theology emphasises the divine transcendence. God is ‘beyond being’, ‘beyond essence’ and God is even, for John Scottus Eriugena for instance, ‘nothingness’ (*nihilum*, *Periphyseon* Book III.685a) and the ‘negation of essence’ (*negatio essentiae*, *Periphyseon* I.462b). Eriugena writes:

For when it is said: ‘It is superessential’, this can be understood by me as nothing other but a negation of essence (*Nam cum dicitur: Superessentialis est, nil aliud mihi datur intelligi quam negatio essentiae*, *Periphyseon* I.462b).

God, for Eriugena, is ‘not this nor that nor anything’ (*nec hoc nec illud nec ullum ille est*, *Periphyseon* I.510c); a formula that will be developed also by Eckhart. Cusanus’ own formulations are close to those of Eckhart and Eriugena. God is ‘beyond all affirmation and negation’ (DDI I.4.12) and is ‘not this rather than that’ (DDI III.2.193):

For God, who is this Maximum, ‘is not *this* thing and is not any *other* thing. He is not here and is not there’, as the same Dionysius says regarding the divine names; for just as He is all things, so He is not any of all the things. (DDI I.16.43)

Cusanus’ commitment to this negative theological tradition is even more informed and broader in that he can reach beyond the specifically Christian authors to embrace, for instance, the Muslim Ibn-Sina (Avicenna) and the Jewish negative theologian Maimonides (DDI I.16.42; I.26.87), whose *Guide of the Perplexed* he knows and whom he portrays as agreeing with Pseudo-Dionysius in this respect.<sup>34</sup> In his *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, Cusanus cites Avicenna as also teaching that God cannot properly be considered as Singular:

But since there cannot be otherness with respect to the Kingdom of God, in which there is a simplicity and peace that transcends all the senses, there is not [in God] singularity in the sense in which our adversary conceives it. Rather, [there is singularity] in the sense in which Avicenna (in his *Metaphysics* [in the section] on confirming the prophet) speaks about the singularity of God. Here he admonishes against speaking to the people about this singularity because it would lead them astray rather than instruct them. For singularity—in the sense in which he enjoins that it be kept concealed—is Singularity of singularities. And thus God is called unsingularly Singular—just as [He is also called] infinite End, limitless Limit, and indistinct Distinction. For whoever directs his mind’s eye toward the Absolute Singularity of all singulars sees clearly enough that Absolute Universality coincides with Absolute Singularity—just

<sup>34</sup> For an excellent discussion of Maimonides’ conception of the divine as transcendent, see Kenneth Seeskin, ‘Metaphysics and Its Transcendence’, in Kenneth Seeskin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), pp. 82–104. Seeskin writes of Maimonides’ negative theology: ‘It follows that “closeness” to God is not a matter of bridging the gap between heaven and earth but of coming to grips with the fact that the gap is infinite and will never be bridged’, p. 91.

as the Absolute Maximum coincides with the Absolute Minimum, in which [Maximum-Minimum] all things are one. Hence, when by means of negative theology Avicenna attempts to ascend unto the singularity of God, he frees God from everything singular and universal. But prior to Avicenna the divine Plato, in the *Parmenides*, more keenly made such an attempt to open a way to God. (*Apologia doctae ignorantiae* 9–10)

Cusanus is, therefore, by far the most knowledgeable writer of his day on the extent of the negative theological tradition, and he can draw not only on Christian, Islamic and Jewish sources, but also can reach back into pagan classical philosophy to identify the negative theological tradition in Pythagoras, Plato and Proclus.

Emphasis on the infinity and transcendence of the divine goes hand in hand with an emphasis on the divine unity and lack of plurality of parts. The Christian Platonists conceived of God more or less in the manner in which Plotinus conceives of the One (developed from the concepts of the One in the hypotheses of Plato's dialogue *Parmenides*). Thus God as the 'One' is above being, beyond the good, beyond the realm of intellect or the intellectual light, dwelling in an inaccessible darkness, unknowable and unfathomable. Of course, contact with the later Neoplatonic tradition of Proclus complicates this picture, making the One even more transcendent, remote and unnamable. The ninth-century Irish Neoplatonist Johannes Scottus Eriugena, for instance, speaks of the 'divine superessentiality' (*divina superessentialitas*, *Periphyseon* III.634b), or—quoting Dionysius *Divine Names* I 1–2 (Patrologia Graeca III 588b–c)—of the 'superessential and hidden divinity' (*superessentialis et occulta divinitas*, *Periphyseon* I.510b). In Book One of the *Periphyseon* Eriugena comments on the meaning of *superessentialis*:

Nutritor; Did we not say that, strictly speaking, the ineffable nature (*ineffabilis natura*) can be signified by no verb, by no noun, and by no other audible sound, by no signified thing? And to this you agreed. For it is not properly but metaphorically (*Non enim proprie sed translative*) that it is called Essence, Truth, Wisdom and other names of this sort. Rather it is called superessential (*superessentialis*), more than truth, more than wisdom. (*Periphyseon* I.460c–461a)

Cusanus too wants to emphasise the transcendence and ineffability of the divine being. He refers in *De docta ignorantia* to God as the 'Maximum' (a term adapted from his reading of Anselm) that is both 'incomprehensibly understandable and unnameably nameable' (DDI 1.5.13). Cusanus is an interesting reader of Anselm's *Proslogion*, and gives a specific interpretation of his definition of God as 'that than which nothing greater is possible' (*quo nihil maius esse potest*, DDI I.2.5).<sup>35</sup> This connection with Anselm is underscored in the *Apologia* where Cusanus remarks:

<sup>35</sup> On the negative theological aspects of Anselm's formulation of the definition of God, see Dermot Moran, 'Neoplatonic and Negative Theological Elements in Anselm's Argument for the Existence of God in *Proslogion*,' in Jean-Marc Narbonne et Alfons Reckermann (eds), *Pensées de l'un dans l'Histoire de la Philosophie. Études en Hommage au Professor Werner Beierwaltes*, Collection Zétésis (Paris/Montréal: Vrin/Presses de l'Université Laval, 2004), pp. 198–229.

For no one was ever so foolish as to maintain that God, who forms all things, is anything other than that than which a greater cannot be conceived. (*Apologia* 8)

The Maximum is, quoting St. Paul, ‘beyond every name’ (DDI I.5.17). It is ‘incommunicable, unintermixable, incontractible to this or that’ (DDI III.1.182). It is, according to the *De docta ignorantia*, that than which there cannot be a greater (DDI I.4.11) and ‘all that which can be’ and in that sense it coincides with its opposite: the ‘Minimum’:

Therefore, Maximum Equality, which is neither other than nor different from anything, surpasses all understanding. Hence, since the absolutely Maximum is all that which can be (*omne id quod esse potest*), it is altogether actual. And just as there cannot be a greater, so for the same reason there cannot be a lesser, since it is all that which can be. But the Minimum is that than which there cannot be a lesser. And since the Maximum is also such, it is evident that the Minimum coincides with the Maximum. (DDI I.4.11)

Cusanus builds on Anselm’s intuition that God necessarily exists, that God is a necessary being; God is ‘absolute necessity’ (DDI I.22.69). But, following the Nominalists and Ockham, he also accepts the view that God is absolutely powerful and is not restricted by anything and hence is the sum of all possibilities. Indeed, Cusanus’ specific originality consists in his use of Nominalist claims about God’s infinite and unlimited power combined with the Scholastic claim that God is pure *esse*, ‘pure actuality’, *actus purus*, ‘maximal actual being’ (*maxima actualis entitas*, DDI I.23.70) and the ‘being of things’ (*entitas rerum*, DDI I.8.22) or ‘being of all being’ (*entitas omnis esse* DDI I.23.73) to make the claim that God is the infinite actualisation of all possibilities, *est actu omne id quod possibile est* (DDI I.5.14). For Cusanus, following Anselm, God is maximal being; he is actually everything that is possible or that He can possibly be. Cusanus, however, begins with Augustinian and Thomistic formulations of God as the ‘being of being’ (DDI I.23.73) and the ‘form of forms’ (*forma formarum*, DDI I.23.70), but then he goes on in Eriugenian and Eckhartian fashion to deny that God is ‘this or that’ and to say that God is not to be considered a being or a substance but is, following Dionysius ‘more than substance’ (DDI I.18.52).

#### THE APPROPRIATENESS OF MATHEMATICAL SYMBOLISM FOR THEOLOGY

The infinite God cannot be comprehended by finite minds and hence must be approached *symbolically*, *per symbola* (DDI I.11.32) or *transferre* (DDI I.12.33). Of course, this tradition is deeply Neoplatonic and plays a large role in Dionysius’ attempts to talk about God, but Cusanus’ particular bent is to invoke the latest scientific findings, and especially to apply mathematical insights (the very traits that have attracted the ‘modernist’ reading). Part of Cusanus’ Platonic heritage consists, of course, in a special appreciation of the role of mathematics in explicating both the nature of the universe and also the nature of the infinite

divinity. God creates the world using number, weight and measure, according to the Bible (Wisdom 11:21) and Cusanus confirms that in creating the world God used the whole quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy, DDI II.13.175). Cusanus' strategy, then, is to take certain finite mathematical relations and proportions and, using a special kind of transformation (*transfere*), to think of them 'infinitely' (DDI I.12.33). As a result Cusanus' dialogues are full of discussions of mathematical figures and theorems.

Following St. Augustine, whom he cites in this regard, he has a general fascination with number symbolism, and endorses Pythagoras' claim that 'all things are constituted and understood through the power of numbers' (DDI I.1.3) and that unity is also triune (DDI I.7.18). God created the universe according to number; number is the 'prime exemplar of the things to be created' (DDI I.11.32). Number is responsible for the *proportio* and harmony between things (DDI I.5.13). Number encompasses all things related proportionally. Indeed, all inquiry moves according to proportion and relation, but there is no proportion between finite and infinite (DDI I.1.3). Number belongs not only to quantity but to all things that can agree or differ substantially or accidentally. There would be no distinctness between things were it not for number - even between two equal things, one will be a duplicate of the first (this thought echoes Proclus). Furthermore, every actual number is finite and hence no number can be the maximum. Otherness is always 'subsequent to oneness' (DDI I.7.18). Between two things there will at least be 'otherness' (DDI I.7.19). The number two is both 'separation and a cause of separation' (DDI I.7.20). Moreover, he is convinced that mathematical objects are finite nevertheless they are the most appropriate symbols to convey to us the infinity of the divine. He is primarily using mathematics as a metaphorical way of representing theological truths. Number is an apt way of symbolising what goes on beyond the sensory realm. It is precisely a symbol that allows us to think the infinite and the transcendent.

In part, the justification for making any relation between the created order and the infinite divine is already to be found in Scripture and especially in St. Paul (especially *Romans* 1:20 and *First Corinthians* 13:12). As Cusanus writes in *De docta ignorantia*:

All our wisest and most divine teachers agree that visible things are truly images of invisible things and that from created things the Creator can be knowably seen as in a mirror and a symbolism. (DDI I.11.30)

Cusanus goes on to claim that:

For all things have a certain comparative relation to one another, [a relation which is], nonetheless, hidden from us and incomprehensible to us ... (DDI I.11.30)

Cusanus is here attesting to the quite traditional medieval notion of a certain *proportio* between created and creator, between above and below, between exemplar and image. This of course is going to be balanced dialectically by the claim that

between finite and infinite there exists no proportion; ‘the infinite escapes all comparative relation’ (DDI I.2.3).

Cusanus justifies the use of mathematical images in typically Platonist terms. The sensible world is too full of mutability: ‘all perceptible things are in a state of continual instability because of the material possibility abounding in them’ (DDI I.11.31). But mathematical objects are free of sensibility to a greater extent (Cusanus concedes they are not completely free of sensibility because they still need to be imagined by the mind) and are true objects of the intellect. More importantly mathematical notions are stable and unchanging: ‘Therefore, in mathematical the wise wisely sought illustrations of things that were to be searched out by the intellect’ (DDI I.11.31).

In the *De docta ignorantia*, finite mathematical symbols have to be transformed somehow into their infinite analogues if they are to become useful for grasping something of the divine nature. But here mathematics already somehow contains this possibility within itself. Although every quantity is finite and limited, it can be conceived as greater than it is, and indeed it can be envisaged as infinite. Thus the mathematician can conceive not just of a straight line but of a straight line that proceeds infinitely. Thus the essence of a finite line is actually an infinite line: ‘every finite line has its being from the infinite line’ (DDI II.5.119).

Cusanus can quote authorities to support his analogies. Anselm had compared God (‘the maximum truth’) to rectitude (*rectitudo*), and Cusanus proposes to think of *rectitudo* symbolically as a straight line. Others have considered God as a ‘triangle consisting of three equal right angles’ (DDI I.12.34)—here Nicholas is thinking of his former teacher Heymericus de Campo (author of *Tractatus de sigillo aeternitatis*). Others have seen God as an infinite circle or indeed an infinite sphere.<sup>36</sup> The point for Cusanus is that there is a very venerable and respectable tradition that utilises mathematical images ‘in a transferred way’ (*transferre*) to express the infinity of the divine. This ‘transferral involves a quasi-mathematical extension of the concept or figure until it reaches infinite or ‘maximal’ proportions and this has to be done not incrementally by adding finite amounts but in one intellectual leap to the infinite. At this point, Cusanus wants us to recognise intellectually, that taken to the infinite, an infinite line, triangle, circle and sphere will all coincide (DDI I.13.35). The distinct essence of each mathematical figure blends with that of the others. All essences therefore coincide in the divine; in God all things are God. Thus ‘by means of mathematical example’ (*exemplo mathematico*, I.24.74) the infinite divine being can be comprehended in what Cusanus claims is a ‘learned ignorance’.

<sup>36</sup> Karsten Harries has discussed in detail Cusanus’ use of the image of God as an infinite sphere whose centre is nowhere and where circumference is everywhere in his ‘The Infinite Sphere: Comments on the History of a Metaphor’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 13.1 (1975), 5–15. The history of this image is charted in Dieter Mahnke, *Unendliche Sphäre und Allmittelpunkt* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1937). For further discussion of Cusanus’ approach to the universe as a springboard for the inception of modernity, see also K. Harries, ‘Perspective and the Infinity of the Universe’, in his *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 22–41.

## THE COINCIDENCE OF CONTRADICTORIES

Echoing Dionysius and Eriugena, Cusanus describes God as ‘beyond all opposition’, ‘free of all opposition’ (DDI I.4.12), ‘beyond all affirmation and negation’ (DDI I.4.12), and, in a formula found in Dionysius (*Divine Names* V.10) and also in Eriugena’s *Periphyseon*, as ‘the opposite of opposites’ (*Apologia*, p. 52). God reconciles all oppositions and indeed in beyond all oppositions.<sup>37</sup> In Cusanus’ *De coniecturis* II.i, God is described as *beyond* the coincidence of contradictories.<sup>38</sup> Cusanus also says that God as the Maximum, although it may be thought of as ‘being’, is not opposed to ‘non-being’ (DDI I.6.16). Similarly, the minimum in the number series is one, which is said to coincide with the Maximum (DDI I.5.13).

In his *Apologia*, Cusanus becomes more explicit regarding the manner in which the human intellect can deal with opposites in a manner rather different from human reason. Reason proceeds, in typical Platonic manner, by inference and opposition. Reason (*ratio*) relies on proportion. Intellect, on the other hand, can transcend opposition. Cusanus writes in his *Apologia*:

Therefore, in the domain of reason (*ratio*) the extremes are separate; for example, with regard to a circle’s definition (viz., that the lines from the center to the circumference be equal): the center [of a circle] cannot coincide with the circumference. But in the domain of the intellect (*intellectus*)—which has seen that number is enfolded in oneness, that a line is enfolded in a point, that a circle is enfolded in a center—the coincidence of oneness and plurality, of point and line, of center and circle is attained by mental sight apart from inference (as you were able to read about in the books *De Coniecturis*, where I also asserted that God is beyond the coincidence of contradictories, since He is the Opposition of opposites, according to Dionysius). (*Apologia* 15)

## MAXIMUM ABSOLUTUM

As we have seen, in *De docta ignorantia*, Cusanus characterises God as ‘infinite oneness’ (*unitas infinita*, I.13.14), ‘absolute Maximum’ (*maximum absolutum*) and as ‘all that which can be’ (*omne id quod esse potest*, DDI I.4.11). God is actually everything which is possible (DDI I.13.14); ‘it also is whatever there can at all possibly be’ (*quae solum illud est id, quod esse potest omni potentia*, DDI II.1.97). The Maximum is said to be ‘incomprehensibly understandable and unnameably

<sup>37</sup> Generally speaking, Cusanus does not distinguish between what he terms ‘opposites’ (e.g. black, white) and ‘contradictories’ (black/not-black). Thus ‘square’ and ‘circular’ are for Cusanus both opposites and contradictories, since being one excludes being the other.

<sup>38</sup> Hopkins, Jasper, in his *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance. A Translation and Appraisal of De docta ignorantia*, 2nd edn. (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1985), p. 6, points out that Cusanus does not actually say in the text of DDI that God is the ‘coincidence of opposites’ (*coincidentia oppositorum*), although, in his dedicatory letter, he does speak of God as that ‘where contradictions coincide’ (*ubi contradictoria coincidunt*).



nameable' (DDI I.5.13). This maximum is pure 'equality' and contains nothing greater or less. As pure equality it is before all difference. God is oneness (*unitas*), and as such is both 'union' (*conexio*) and the 'cause of union' (DDI I.7.20). As we have seen, Cusanus begins with the thought of God as an infinite, ungenerated one, a one from which all other unities derive, just as 'one' is the beginning of all numbers (DDI I.5.14) and yet not itself a number.<sup>39</sup> Oneness cannot be a number because all numbers admit of greater and less, but oneness does not admit of greater or less. Oneness is both the minimum and also the maximum and end of all number. Cusanus makes use of the idea found in Dionysius and Eriugena that God is the beginning, middle and end of all things.

In Platonic and indeed Augustinian fashion, Cusanus divides the world into the realm of true being (or maximal being) and the realm of not-being or contracted being (DDI I.6.16). God is truth and being and all else belongs to mutability and instability: 'All perceptible things are in a state of continual instability because of the material possibility abiding in them' (DDI I.11.31).

Cusanus writes a great deal about the complexity of the created universe but it is also presented as something created and hence ontologically dependent and unstable. It has what Cusanus will call a 'contracted' character. Yet, paradoxically, the otherness of that which is not the One does not come from the One itself (which lacks all otherness) but somehow comes from otherness itself.

#### THE NEOPLATONIC CONCEPT OF OTHERNESS (*ALTERITAS*) AND CUSANUS' CONCEPT OF CONTRACTION (*CONTRACTIO*)

As a Neoplatonist, Cusanus begins with the One, but immediately goes on to postulate the category of the 'other' or 'otherness' (*alteritas*), which is always understood as the sign of multiplicity and 'mutability' (*mutabilitas*, DDI I.7.18). All things that are not absolutely one must in some sense be *other* than the one. The other, moreover, is always construed as temporal and not eternal, as changing rather than as stable. Just as one is union and the cause of union, the next number, two, is the cause of separation and division. Cusanus writes:

Likewise, the number two (*binarius*) is both separation (*divisio*) and the cause of separation; for two is the first separation. ... But separation and otherness are by nature concomitant. Hence union is eternal (just as in oneness), since it is prior to otherness. (DDI I.7.20)

The reasoning is Platonic—and close to many formulations found in the *Parmenides*. For instance, in *Parmenides* 141d it is attested that the One has nothing to do with time; and similarly, at *Parmenides* 139c, that the one excludes

<sup>39</sup> Cusanus follows the tradition of Aristotle, *Metaphysics* x, 1, 1052b24ff and Boethius, *De Institutione Mathematica* 1, 3 in not treating one as a number yet seeing it as the beginning and origin of the number series (*De Institutione Mathematica* 1, 23). For both, number is a collection or plurality of unities; whereas unity is somehow above number since it does not participate in plurality.

all difference (even its difference from the other). The One cannot participate in otherness and hence, as Cusanus will explicate, it is better to refer to God as ‘not other’ (*non aliud*) as he argues in his *De li non aliud*.

Otherness, on the other hand, is always self-dispersing and hence limiting itself (by the very fact that two things must be other than each other, both must be finite). As Cusanus attests: ‘Between two things there must at least be otherness’ (DDI I.7.19). The pluralities of things descend from the deity as ‘infinite oneness’ (DDI I.5.14) and cannot exist independently of it. They have dependent being, ‘being-from’ (*abesse*, DDI II.2.98), not ‘being’ (*esse*). Their being is always a dependent being. Hence, on Cusanus’ view, everything after the One is created by the One.

Cusanus, in *De docta ignorantia* Book Two, argues that, while all created things are modelled on the absolute Maximum, the Maximum by itself does not impart diminished being but that created things gain these attributes of corruptibility not from any positive cause but from failing to be the Maximum:

Similarly with things: since they cannot be the Maximum, it happens that they are diminished, other, distinct, and the like—none of which [characteristics] has a cause. Therefore a created thing has from God the fact that it is one, distinct, and united to the universe; and the more it is one, the more like unto God it is. However, it does not have from God (nor from any positive cause but [only] contingently) the fact that its oneness exists in plurality, its distinctness in confusion, and its union in discord. (DDI II.2.99)

This is a version of an argument also used by Eriugena to argue that God’s will is to create an infinite universe that is like him in every respect. Somehow creation itself acts to restrict itself and become ‘unlike’. But this constriction or departure from oneness is not a positive act of the divine will. It is somehow an intrusion of ‘otherness’ or of contingency itself, which is treated as without cause. It is a limitation introduced by the very nature of possibility itself (wherever possibility is opposed to actuality, possibility is somehow limited). Thus ‘contraction of actuality is the result of contingency’ (DDI II.8.139).

#### THE ARISTOTELIAN RESPONSE: JOHANNES WENCK VON HERRENBERG (c.1390–1460)

Cusanus’ Platonist approach to theology did not go unchallenged in his day. Another German theologian, Johannes Wenck, a graduate of Paris and Heidelberg (and even Rector of the University of Heidelberg on three separate occasions: 1435, 1444 and 1451) was a defender of Thomism and Aristotelianism against Eckhart and the Beghards.<sup>40</sup> Wenck’s riposte to Cusanus is entitled

<sup>40</sup> Wenck had a considerable philosophical output. His writings include: *Parva logicalia* (before 1426), in G. Steer (ed.), *De imagine et similitudine contra eghardicos* (1430); *Das Buchlein von der Seele* (1436), (Munich; Fink, 1967), *Commentary on Boethius’ de Hebdomadibus*, *Commentary on Aristotle’s De anima III*, *Commentary on the Liber de causis*, and a commentary of Pseudo-Dionysius’ *Celestial Hierarchy* (1455).

*De ignota litteratura* (Concerning Ignorant Learning or On Unknown Learning).<sup>41</sup> Wenck attacked Cusanus as a pantheist and heretic. For him, Cusanus' learned ignorance actually leads to the stubborn ignorance of heresy: 'For the teachings of the Waldensians, Eckartians and Wycliffians have long shown from what spirit this learned ignorance proceeds' (*De ignota* 21). Overall, Wenck is suspicious that Cusanus has strayed into pantheism.<sup>42</sup>

Wenck is entirely unhappy with the unguarded way Cusanus utilises the traditional ontological categories inherited from Thomist, Scotist and Ockhamist thought, on the one hand, and the negative theological tradition (Proclus, Dionysius), on the other, to allow God to be thought about in new ways. God is the 'being of things (*entitas rerum*), the 'form of being' (*forma essendi*), a formulation which Johannes Wenck criticises as belonging to the Beghard heresy. Wenck writes in a restrained, formal and pedantic manner in contrast to Cusanus' exuberance. He identifies Cusanus' main theses one by one and draws corollaries from them, and proceeds to identify formal weaknesses of reasoning, contradictions as well as theological errors. Wenck is a Neo-Aristotelian Thomist and his aim is to defend scientific knowledge and proper method and in this respect, the method of philosophy is rational inquiry carried out in a comparative manner using proportion (*proportio*). Indeed, he believes Cusanus has been led into error by 'meagreness in instruction in logic' (*De ignota litteratura* 24). In reasoning and learning, according to Wenck, we move from what is certain to what is uncertain and compare one to the other. Wenck favours progress in knowledge through incremental gain. He writes:

Thus, each thing to be sought, pursued, or investigated comes to be judged and known from a proportional, or a comparative, reduction of what is uncertain, unknown, or unapprehended (which is being inquired about) to something taken to be certain, known, manifest, and apprehended, so that it becomes known and is manifested. Hence, the beginning (*inchoatio sive inceptio aut initium*) of a rational inference is from what is known; and the end and goal is the manifesting of what is unknown. (*De ignota litteratura* 22)

<sup>41</sup> Wenck's *De ignota litteratura* is found in Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Debate with John Wenck. A Translation and Appraisal of De Ignota litteratura and Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae Nicholas of Cusa*, op. cit. Wenck's title, like Cusanus' *docta ignorantia*, is deliberately ambiguous: *ignotus* means 'unknown, obscure' and *litteratura* means 'a work composed of letters'. Wenck himself refers to Psalm 70: 15–16, where David says he does not know learning but will enter into the power of the Lord, and Isaiah 29:11–12, where it is said a sealed book will be given to one who does not know letters. The title may also refer to the unknown learning of Christ which was offered to the Corinthians. The Cusanus scholar Rudolf Haubst maintains motive for Wenck's attack on Cusanus is not based on a personal quarrel dating from the Council of Basel, as Cusanus contends in his *Apologia*, but rather is based on Wenck's concern to establish orthodoxy, see Rudolf Haubst, *Studien zu Nikolaus von Kues und Johannes Wenck, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters* 38 (1955), p. 113. Following on from Cusanus' *Apologia*, Wenck then wrote a further reply *De facie scolae doctae ignorantiae* (c.1449–1455), and there is a reference to this work in the Vatican Library, but no manuscript has been found.

<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of Cusanus' alleged pantheism, see Dermot Moran, 'Pantheism in Eriugena and Nicholas of Cusa', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 44.1 (Winter 1990), 131–152.

In relation to Cusanus' emphasis on the infinity of the desire for knowledge, Wenck concedes that Cusanus too has a zeal for knowing (*emulatio sive zelus sciendi*), but argues that his desire is not according to knowledge (*De ignota literatura* 23). Desire for knowledge must be proportionate to the kind of knowledge that may in fact be gained. For Cusanus, 'knowing is non-knowing' (*scire est ignorare*) and his professed aim is to embrace incomprehensible things incomprehensibly' (*Ignota* 20). According to Cusanus, God as infinite and escapes all proportion, hence our ignorance aims to leave behind all sensible things. But, for Wenck, on the other hand, God is known only his effects in creation and through analogy. Wenck is opposed to Cusanus' claim that all finite knowledge is essentially imprecise. Intellectual movement ceases to be movement if it has no point against which to measure itself in terms of its progress towards its goal. He, hence, accuses Cusanus of destroying the scientific process itself.

Wenck offers an Aristotelian account of knowledge based on the experiences of the senses, whereby all knowing requires mediation in terms of a phantasm or image. Wenck quotes Aristotle's *De Anima* Book III, 2 425b19-26: 'the image is to the intellect what colour is to sight' (*hoc sit phantasma ad intellectum quod color est ad visum*). Without colour activating sight, the eye cannot see anything. The human mind always knows through the image or similitude.

Accordingly Holy Scripture has taught us through symbolisms that which is divinely inspired and revealed—also doing so conformably to the usual manner of our natural conception (*De ignota literatura* 21).

Wenck here invokes a standard principle articulated in Boethius' *De consolazione philosophiae* V.4, according to which everything which is received is received according to the mode of the recipient. In other words, knowledge is always relative to the abilities of the knower and the disclosiveness of the known. There is always a *proportion* between knower and known. How then can Cusanus abandon this position and attain an 'incomprehensible' apprehension of God? Surely this is not any kind of knowledge; it is simply error. In traditional Aristotelian fashion, Wenck thinks that Cusanus' reasoning repeatedly violates the principle of non-contradiction. He claims that if there is no opposition or contradiction then Cusanus cannot be refuted since refutation depends on stating the contradictory. Similarly, it would mean that in God there would be no inconsistency between a proposition and its negation. This would also destroy the 'basic principle of our knowledge' (*semen omnis doctrinae*)—that it is impossible to be and not to be the same thing—*idem esse et non esse impossibile* (from Aristotle *Metaphysics* IV, 4, 1006b19 ff).

Wenck's text is helpful for putting Cusanus' Platonic speculations into the context of late medieval School theology. In contrast to Wenck's Aristotelian caution, Cusanus' riposte is to sketch for Wenck the tradition of Platonist negative theology and to self-consciously attach himself to this Platonic tradition. Many of Cusanus' speculations will continue to inform modern philosophy (for instance Descartes' discussions of the nature of the divine infinity) in a subterranean manner. But in reading Cusanus we sense an intellect at home in the speculative dialectical tradition of Plato's *Parmenides*, Proclus and Dionysius. The Christian

Platonist tradition in Northern Europe had a tremendous advocate in Cusanus just as Ficino was transforming Platonism for the Italian Renaissance.

#### CONCLUSION

As we have seen Nicholas of Cusa is a transitional figure in a time of great intellectual ferment and eclecticism. While his thought is extremely complex, its focus is clear: his entire interest is theological in the traditional manner of seeking appropriate names for the divine and meditating on the manner in which humans can transcend their own finitude in order to come into some kind of unity with the deity. His aim is always to show the limitations on merely human knowledge, and to instruct us in our ignorance. This is the 'instruction of ignorance' (*doctrina ignorantiae*, DDI II Prol. 90). Cusanus is stressing the *finitude* of the human mind and the ultimate failure of the promethean project of absolute scientific knowledge. But in all his formulations he remains remarkably faithful to the Platonic tradition that he shows as developing in a unified way from Plato through Dionysius and Eriugena to Eckhart and himself. Cusanus furthermore is willing to defend this Platonic tradition against the Neo-Scholastic challenge.

Uncorrected Proof