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Nicholas of Cusa *On Learned Ignorance*

Seminar Notes

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1. Introduction

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Many philosophers today have become uneasy about what philosophy has become and where it has led us. Nietzsche and Heidegger, Derrida and Rorty are just a few names. Their uneasiness mirrors widespread concern about the shape of our modern culture. As more and more begin to suspect that the road on which we have been travelling may be a dead end, attempt are made to retrace steps taken; a search begins for missed turns and for those who may have misled us.

Among these Descartes has long occupied a special place as the thinker whose understanding of proper method helped found modern philosophy, science, and indeed the shape of our technological world. It is thus to be expected that attempts to question modernity, to confront it, in order perhaps to take a step beyond it, should have often taken the form of attempts to confront Descartes or Cartesian rationality. Think of Heidegger. I, too, attempt something of the sort in the Descartes seminar I am teaching this term, although I think it is far more difficult to get around Descartes than Heidegger did. What I attempt in the present seminar is part of a related effort. It here takes the form of an attempt to take a step back from the *mathesis universalis* of Descartes to the *docta ignorantia* of Cusanus.

In the last hundred years the significance of Cusanus has been increasingly recognized, especially due to the efforts of the Neo-Kantians Hermann Cohen and Ernst Cassirer, who found in Cusanus provocative anticipations of Kant. Others have found in him anticipations of Leibniz, and of Hegel. Such anticipations might seem reason enough to spend some time on him.

But my interest in Cusanus is not just or even primarily historical. His doctrine of learned ignorance, I feel, despite the many ways in which what Cusanus has to say must seem dated, still provides us with a continuing challenge. Inseparable from this doctrine is an insight into the radical transcendence of reality, so different from the ontology implied by Descartes' insistence on the primacy of clear and distinct ideas.

When someone uses the term "transcendence" we should ask just what is being transcended. With Cusanus it is the reach of our reason. Being and reason are thought to be finally incommensurable. With Cusanus this thought intertwines with his

understanding of the infinite transcendence of God, which has to elude all our attempts to comprehend it.

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But why should all this be of more than historical interest? Let me express here a personal conviction: I think it is impossible to do philosophy well without also doing the history of philosophy. That is to claim that philosophy stands in a different relationship to its history than, say, physics. And this, as will become clear, must mean also that it stands in a different relationship to truth.

I am quite aware that much recent philosophy has been quite ahistorical in orientation. Descartes may be cited in support of such an approach. Or consider Wittgenstein's explanation, in the Preface to the *Tractatus*, of his failure to give his readers an adequate accounting of his sources. He there declares it a matter of indifference to him, whether what he has thought was thought before him by another. By now, of course, the *Tractatus*, too, has been placed in its historical context and commentators have provided many of the missing footnotes. But why should these matter to the philosopher? What is it to read and interpret a philosophical text? How does it differ from reading, say, a physics text? A poem? In Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* we find the following remark:

> 531: We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than a musical theme can be replaced by another.)

> In the one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences, in the other, something that is expressed only by these words in these positions.

Where do philosophical texts stand on this spectrum? Is it clear that there is only one answer to this question? We may want to range philosophical texts with science. This is indeed what our Cartesian inheritance would have us do. To do so we do not have to deny that every philosopher has to express himself in a particular philosophical language, rooted in a particular tradition. Learning a philosopher's sources can be likened to learning a language. But should we not still distinguish, as Wittgenstein tries to do in

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the *Tractatus*, what is being thought from the way it is being expressed? In the preface to the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein is quite willing to grant that he may not have succeeded in expressing his thoughts as clearly as possible "Here I am conscious that I have fallen far short of the possible." One is reminded of Kant's willingness to admit in the prefaces to both the first and the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* that his manner of representation left room for considerable improvement. So understood the pursuit of truth demands a certain indifference to expression. It demands objectivity. What has been understood in this sense can be translated, can be put differently. Is the young Wittgenstein then not right: given the philosopher's concern for truth, the history of its discovery (and with it the question of originality) should have no philosophical importance? Does philosophy, like science, then not demand a certain indifference to history?

That matters are not quite so simple is suggested by the fact that in that same preface Wittgenstein is not willing to claim that the truth of what he has asserted is unassailable, but only that what he has asserted seems true to him. But what seems true to us will depend on our historical situation. The pursuit of truth would therefore seem to demand reflection on the possible distortions bound up with that situation. Reflection, we might say, on Wittgenstein's fundamentally Cartesian prejudice concerning the possibility of coming to a clear and distinct understanding of reality. As we know, Wittgenstein soon was to change his mind.

But how are we to distinguish between the truth and what seems to us to be the truth? Think of Descartes' vain attempt to think free of the burden of past prejudice. The more carefully we reflect on what Descartes has written, the more entangled intuition and reliance on the words of others become. Historical reflection, I would like to suggest, helps to cure the philosopher's hubris. This is why it is important to place Wittgenstein and Descartes in their historical context. Such historical awareness lets the philosopher become learned not only about his or her, but about our own ignorance. And as we shall see, there is a connection between such reflection and Cusanus' doctrine of Learned Ignorance, although the latter has a much wider scope.

But, one may want to ask in reply, can philosophy survive this cure? Does historical reflection of this sort, or more generally the doctrine of learned ignorance, i.e. reflection on the conditions that prevent human beings from ever gaining free access to

what is to be thought, from ever seizing the truth, not bring with it something like the suicide of science, and more especially of philosophy? John Wenck will raise a somewhat related objection to the doctrine of learned ignorance: that it destroys the very foundations of knowledge, of responsible thinking.

3

Can philosophy secure these foundations, as Descartes had hoped? What is philosophy?

In the first book of the Metaphysics Aristotle claims that:

it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize; they wondered originally at obvious difficulties, then advanced, little by little and stated difficulties about the greater matters, e.g. about the phenomena of the moon and those of the sun and the stars, and about the genesis of the universe.¹

Philosophy has its origin in dislocation, in a leave-taking from what is ready to hand, from the everyday world and its concerns. This leave-taking must render philosophy problematic. Thus in Plato's *Theaetetus* we have the anecdote about the Thracian servant-girl, who mocks Thales for falling into a well while gazing at the mysteries of the sky. Socrates tells this story about the founder of philosophy to illustrate that only the outer form of the philosopher is in the city:

the mind, disdaining all littlenesses and nothingnesses of human things, is 'flying all abroad' as Pindar says, measuring earth and heaven, and the things which are under and on the earth and above the heaven, interrogating the whole nature of each and all in their entirety, but not condescending to anything which is within reach.²

Philosophy reaches for what is beyond our reach. Such reaching would appear to be a presupposition of science. But does philosophy not overreach itself when it engages in transcendental reflection? Aristotle himself cites the warning of Simonides that it unfitting for humans to seek knowledge not fitted for them. Aristotle of course rejects this warning. He thinks human beings capable of the truth. As we shall see, it is this

¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, 980a 22-27. Trans. W. D. Ross.

² Plato, *Theaetetus*, 173d-174a. Trans. Francis Macdonald Cornford.

confidence that is challenged by the doctrine of Learned Ignorance. As Wenck suggests, there would seem to be a deep opposition between Cusanus and Aristotle.

But before turning to Cusanus, let me return to that power of flight mentioned by Plato. How are we to understand that power? Important here is the transcendence of thought over sensation and imagination, mirrored in the distinction between appearance and reality. We are haunted by the idea of an access to reality free from the distortions of particular perspectives and points of view, free from the accident of time and place. We are haunted by the idea of a truly objective knowledge. In the second book of On Learned Ignorance Cusanus will give us a paradigm of such speculation. The hold a particular perspective has on us is broken as soon as we recognize it as a perspective. Copernicus will invoke the same thought experiment to introduce his own more cosmological reflections reflections. We have here an example of a pattern of thought I want to call Copernican reflection.³ The power of perspective brings with it something like a natural anthropocentrism. Copernican revolutions have challenged versions of that anthropocentrism over and over. The linguistic and historical turns taken by philosophy may be considered such revolutions: the latter bids me think of my historical situation, too, as providing a particular point of view that lets me think and experience the world in certain questionable ways. The shape of the modern world furnishes me with something like a cultural, and therefore questionable *a priori*. It furnishes nothing like a *terra firma*. Pushed to this point, Copernican reflection calls into question the pursuit of truth.

For, if in thought we can fly above our situation, we have no vision to match this flight of thought. As Nietzsche put it, we have no organ for the truth. In transcendental Copernican reflection the human being grasps himself not as he is, but as the ever elusive form of all he might possibly be. The place which I actually occupy now comes to be thought of as a place I just happen to occupy, my way of life as just one of endlessly many possible ways of life. I come to view the world *sub specie possibilitatis*. In such reflection reality is reduced to opaque facticity, human existence to a dislocated, free-floating freedom that no longer can discover its proper place. The price of the philosopher's flight to heaven would appear to be radical dislocation. If, as Wittgenstein puts it in the *Investigations*, philosophical problems have the form, I have lost my way,

³ Cf. Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).

then it would seem that the philosopher's transcendental reflection only raises the problem to a higher power.

Given this situation, it is tempting to seek to recover the lost ground by returning to ordinary life and ordinary language. But historical awareness forces us to recognize that ordinary language offers itself as at best a very shifting ground: our common sense has historical roots, including roots in past metaphysics and is entangled with it. The boundary between ordinary and philosophical discourse cannot finally be drawn. Philosophical responsibility would seem to demand a critical appropriation of whatever maps philosophers rely on. But part of such appropriation has to be a careful look at the history of philosophy.

If philosophy has its origin in dislocation, it would seem to be equally essentially an attempt at relocation. The fundamental question of philosophy is: where is our place?

But does philosophical reflection provide an answer? What is it able to do and what are its limits? This leads to the question: what can we know? This seminar will turn around this question.

4

What makes Cusanus so interesting today is first of all his historical position. More than any other major philosopher he stands between, or marks the threshold separating the Middle Ages and the modern period. This threshold gains in interest as we recognize that the new beginning associated with Descartes must itself be called into question.

A few facts about his life: Cusanus is one of the few philosophers that demand of the experts that they visit the places with which he was associated. Cusanus was born in 1401 in Kues, in Latin Cusa, a village on the Moselle, not too far from Trier, in a region that has long been known for its superb wines. His family was apparently quite well to do,⁴ making its living off the river, especially with shipping. This connection with the river is suggested by the family name, Krebs, or Chryfftz, meaning crayfish, shown in the cardinal's coat of arms, which we can still see in a number of churches with which he was associated, so in the copper plate that in 1488 was placed over his heart, which, following

⁴ Cf. Acta Cusana. Quellen zur Lebensgeschichte des Nikolaus von Kues, ed. Erich Meuthen, Bd. I, 1 (Hamburg: Meiner, 1976), Nrs. 2-10, 13.

About the childhood of Cusanus we know little. There is some circumstantial evidence that he studied with the Brothers of the Common Life at the famous Latin school in Deventer, as Erasmus of Rotterdam was to do sixty years later.⁵ We can assume that already in these early years he became acquainted with Rhenish mysticism. Cusanus was only 15, already a cleric, when he enrolled in the University of Heidelberg, a center of nominalism. After perhaps a year,⁶ he was to leave Heidelberg for Padua, ever since the Condemnation of 1277 the leading university in Europe, a center especially for the study of nature — a hundred years later Copernicus was to complete his studies here. Cusanus stayed six years in Padua, receiving his Doctor of Laws in 1423. Besides canon law, he also studied mathematics and astronomy. And in Padua he found a number of friends, most importantly the mathematician and doctor Paolo Toscanelli, to whom he remained close for the rest of his life. After a brief stay in Rome, we find Cusanus back in the Rhineland, where a number of benefices testify to the high esteem in which the young cleric was already being held by the archbishop of Trier. Thus supported, he was able to continue his studies in theology and philosophy at the university of Cologne in 1425, where Heimeric de Campo, an admirer of Albert the Great and Raymond Lull, appears to have become his mentor. At the same time Cusanus would seem to have made a name for himself as a teacher of canon law, otherwise it is difficult to understand the offer of a professorship at the recently founded university of Louvain that he received in 1428⁷ and rejected, perhaps because his archbishop, Otto von Ziegenhain, had other plans for him and by then had called him back to Trier. In 1427 Cusanus was back in Rome, now as the archbishop's representative.

In the following years Cusanus was to become very active in Church politics. The death of archbishop Otto in 1430 had led to a contested episcopal election in Trier, which pitted the candidate elected by the majority of the chapter, one Jacob von Sirck, against Ulrich von Manderscheid, who initially had received only two votes, but could count on the support of the local nobility, a local repetition of the Great Schism that not

⁵ Gerd Heinz-Mohr, "Bemerkungen zur Spiritualität der Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben," *Nicolo' Cusano. Agli Inizi del Mondo Moderno,* p. 471.

⁶ Cf. Acta Cusana, Nr. 11, pp. 3-4.

⁷ The invitation was repeated in 1435 and once again rejected.

long ago had divided the Church for forty years between popes in Rome and Avignon, to which a third pope was added when the Council of Pisa ineffectively sought to depose the two rivals and elected its own candidate.⁸ The Schism was ended finally only in 1417 by the Council of Constance, which asserting the superiority of such a general council over all individuals, including even the pope, forced the abdication or deposition of all three popes and the election of Martin V. It was this pope who now sought to end the schism in Trier by appointing his own candidate, Raban, bishop of Speyer, archbishop, even though the cathedral chapter by then had united behind Ulrich von Manderscheid. Ulrich chose the young canon lawyer, whom he had made his secretary and chancellor, to argue his somewhat shaky case before the Council that had convened in Basel to complete the work begun in Constance. Although after many presentations Cusanus failed in his mission to persuade those assembled of the merits of his patron's case, he quickly emerged as one of the most articulate and influential politicians at Basel.

The Council was in turmoil when Cusanus first arrived in Basel in 1432. His interest in Latin manuscripts, which bore fruit in his rediscovery of twelve comedies by Plautus, had already secured him a certain reputation among Italian humanists. More important, however, was the fact that one of his old friends from Padua, now Cardinal Julius Cesarini (1398 - 1444), who in 1431 had been appointed by Pope Martin V to preside over the Council as his legate, had resigned that appointment to protest the issuing of a bull by Martin's sucessor Eugenius IV that dissolved the Council, an action to which the Council responded in turn by reiterating the pope's subordination to a general council that had been proclaimed at Constance. Supported by the Emperor, the Council decided to suspend the pope, who, however, gave in to what the Council demanded and revoked his earlier bull of dissolution. Not surprisingly, given the cause that brought him to Basel. Cusanus, like his older friend Cesarini, on his arrival actively supported the Council in its struggle with the pope — and as such a supporter he presents himself to us in his first work, *De Concordantia Catholica* (1433). But famously, or infamously, Cusanus soon switched sides and supported the pope. Was it the loss of his suit that had turned him against the Council? Or had he learned from interminable discussions that seemed to accomplish very little to distrust the democratic process and to put greater faith

⁸ Cf. Paul E, Sigmund, *Nicholas of Cusa and Medieval Political Thought* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard, 1963), pp. 11-38.

in autocratic rule? Given his lifelong striving for harmony, he must have been troubled by the divisions that rent the Council, by its radicalization, its increasingly strident opposition to the pope, which went so far as to set the Council up as the Church's supreme governing body and to insist that papal tax collectors henceforth send their money to Basel, not to Rome, claiming for itself the right to grant indulgences and canonizations.⁹ One issue that divided the Council was a democratization that gave a simple parish priest or master of arts the same vote as a bishop or cardinal, a development that caused most of the higher clergy to reconsider their challenge to the pope. What authority could such a divided council claim? Had Cusanus himself not argued that the mark of a valid council "was that it was concluded in harmony, by which he seems to have meant by unanimous agreement"?¹⁰ How could negotiations that Aeneas Silvius, one of the chroniclers of the Council, "compared unfavorably to drunkards in a tavern,"¹¹ claim superiority over the pope? "The council rent by divisions seemed to Cusanus to be not the church of God, but the synagogue of Satan."¹²

In a world where centrifugal forces threatened to tear Church and Europe apart, Cusanus labored for unity; and so it seems fitting that his final break with the fractured and fractious Council should have come after a tumultuous meeting in the cathedral (May 7, 1437), a meeting at which the majority, faced with the possibility of reuniting the Eastern and the Western church, refused to honor the wishes of the Greek representatives, who for obvious reasons insisted that the final negotiations take place in an Adriatic seaport.¹³ Cusanus left with two bishops and the Greek representatives for Bologna to get papal approval before travelling on to Constantinople to prepare for a council of reunification. When the pope later that year transferred the Council to Italy, those remaining in Basel attempted to reassert that council's authority, ineffectually suspending the pope and stripping his supporters, including Cusanus, of their ecclesiastical offices.¹⁴

⁹ Ibid., pp. 221, 227.

¹⁰ Ibid., p, 233.

 ¹¹ Ibid., p. 224. Cf. Will-Erich Peuckert, *Die Große Wende. Das apokalyptische Saeculum und Martin Luther*, 2 vols. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1948) pp. 501-505.

¹² Sigmund.,p. 229.

¹³ Ibid., p. 228.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 225.

No doubt considerations advanced by his older friend Cesarini, who also made his definitive break with the Basel Council when it refused to accommodate the Greeks, reinforced Cusanus' decision to desert the Council 's cause. Was he also moved by that opportunism with which his enemies charged him? Be this as it may, Basel changed Cusanus into an untiring defender of papal supremacy, a reversal that was to earn him the bitter and lifelong enmity of conciliarists like the zealous Gregor von Heimburg and it earned him the epithet "The Hercules of the Eugenians" from Aeneas Silvius, and Pope Eugene IV's personal support, renewed by his successors Nicholas V, Calixtus III, and Pius II (Aeneas Silvius). In these years we see Cusanus involved in various attempts to restore unity to Christendom, indeed to unite all of humanity in one faith. Still as a member of the Council he thus negotiated with the Bohemian Hussites and the compromise he proposed, although initially rejected, became the basis of the agreement that was reached in 1436.

I have already mentioned his journey to Constantinople for discussions with the Eastern Church, which, threatened by Ottoman expansion, was looking west for support. Fleeting union was in fact achieved at the Council of Ferrara, transferred to Florence in 1439 — it could not save Constantinople, which fell to the Turks only a few years later, in 1453. But whatever was achieved in Florence was shadowed by the increasing hostility of the Council of Basel, which answered the pope's decree that proclaimed the reunification of the Church by deposing him and electing its own anti-pope. The schism seemed to have returned, keeping Cusanus busy from 1438 on, asserting ever more strongly the pope's supreme authority and challenging the authority of the Council at Basel. The threat it posed to papal authority was ended only in 1448 by the Concordat of Vienna, followed by the resignation of the anti-pope Felix V and the final signing in 1449 of what had been agreed on. Cusanus' tireless work for pope and Church did not go unrewarded: Around 1440 he was ordained a priest, which meant first of all financial security, and just before his death in 1447 Pope Eugene IV named him a cardinal, an appointment reconfirmed by his successor Nicholas V, who shortly after his investiture in 1450 also named him prince-bishop of Brixen (Bressanone), south of the Brenner. This last appointment proved his Syracuse: from the very beginning the papal appointee was considered an unwelcome intruder by the Tyroleans, who had already chosen their duke

Sigismund's chancellor, Leonhard Wiesmayer for their bishop, but were forced by the emperor to accept the pope's decision.

Before being able to assume his post in Brixen, Cusanus was sent by the pope on a legation to Germany and the Low Countries with the important mission of reforming a church very much in need of reform. The cause of conciliarism was still smoldering, supported by national interests that threatened Church and Empire with disintegration, and there were countless abuses that needed addressing. The reformation shows that Cusanus was less than successful: centrifugal proved stronger than centripetal powers; the center no longer would hold — a problem with which Cusanus struggled in different ways as long as he lived.

Only in 1452 was Cusanus able to settle in Brixen — although "settle" is hardly the right word: The stubborn cardinal's attempts to use threats, church bans, and military force to bring about the reforms he thought necessary in his diocese only led to counterforce, even threats to his life, and eventual capture by the Tyrolean duke Sigismund, whose resolve to resist the pope and his appointee was strengthened by one of Cusanus' enemies from the Basel days, Gregor von Heimburg, who had become the duke's adviser. Released only after making concessions that he later revoked as coerced, Cusanus left the Tyrol for Rome in 1460, where he was eagerly awaited by his old friend Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, who with his support, had become a cardinal in 1456, Pope Pius II in 1458, and had learned to respect and rely on the judgment of Cusanus, appointing him vicargeneral for the Papal States in 1458.¹⁵ Happy to have Cusanus with him once more, he kept him busy in Rome, although here, too, as later again in Orvieto,¹⁶ Cusanus' attempts at reform proved ineffective.

Meanwhile the situation in Brixen remained unresolved. It took years and the efforts of pope and emperor to work out a compromise with the Tyrolean duke that would have allowed Cusanus to return. But two weeks before that compromise, while on a mission for his pope to help care for remnants of an army that had gathered in Ancona in preparation for a crusade that due to lack of support never materialized, he had died in Todi on August 11, 1464. His friend Pius II died three days later.¹⁷

¹⁵ Erich Meuthen, *Die letzten Jahre des Nikolaus Cusanus* (Köln und Opladen: Wesstdeutscher Verlag, 1958), p. 28.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 116 - 122.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 122-125.

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That Cusanus represents a position between two ages appears to have been felt already by his contemporaries. Significantly it is in a eulogy, included in Giovanni Andrea de Bussi's dedicatory epistle to Pope Paul II that accompanied his Apuleius edition (1469) and written shortly after the cardinal's death, that we hear for the first time the expression Middle Ages (*media tempestas*) being used — for six years Bussi was the cardinal's secretary and with the cardinal's encouragement had established the first Italian printing shop in the Benedictine monastery of Subiaco (1465). In that epistle he praises Cusanus, this best of all men (*vir eo melior nunquam sit natus*), among other things, for keeping in his memory, not just the works of the ancient authors, but also those of both the earlier and the later Middle Ages, right down to our own time.¹⁸ An epochal threshold has been crossed.¹⁹ It is the philosophical significance of that threshold I am trying to understand. The characterization of the preceding centuries as *media tempestas* suggests on one hand that one no longer felt part of it, on the other it recognizes a desire on the part of Cusanus to preserve a certain continuity.

Cusanus would appear to have recognized more clearly than perhaps any other thinker of the time the to us strange connection between Eckhartian mysticism and Renaissance humanism, between theocentrism and anthropocentrism. In him, at any rate, they come together without apparent tension.

It is thus significant that in Alberti's *On Painting* and in Cusanus' we find a rehabilitation of the much maligned Protagoras against the critique of Aristotle and Plato. Both suggest that when Protagoras called man the measure of all things he said something profound. Here is Alberti's remark:

Since man is the thing best known to man, perhaps Protagoras, by saying that man is the mode and measure of all things, meant that all the

¹⁸ Vir ipse, quod rarum est in Germania, supra opinionem eloquens et Latinus, historias idem omnes non priscas modo, sed mediae tempestatis tum veteres, tum recentiores usque ad nostra tempora memoria retinebat. Cited in Nikolaus von Cues, Vom Nichtanderen (Hamburg: Meiner, 1952), trans. Paul Wilpert, p. 101, fn. 1

¹⁹ See Peuckert, pp. 333-344.

accidents of things are known through comparison to the accidents of man.²⁰

This had been preceded by the statement that all things are known by comparison. We measure the unfamiliar by the familiar. But we are most familiar with ourselves, for Alberti this means first of all our body. It provides us with a natural measure.

And here is Cusanus in *De Beryllo*:

Thirdly, note the saying of Protagoras that man is the measure of things. With the sense man measures perceptible things, with the intellect he measures intelligible things, and he attains unto supra-intelligible things transcendently. Man does this measuring in accordance with the aforementioned [cognitive modes]. For then he knows that the cognizing soul is the goal of things knowable, he knows on the basis of the perceptive power that perceptible things are supposed to be such as can be perceived. And likewise [he knows] regarding intelligible things that [they are supposed to be such] as can be understood, and [he knows] that transcendent things [are to be such] as can transcend. Hence, man finds in himself, as in a measuring scale, all created things.²¹

To the extent that we can know things at all, they must be capable of entering our consciousness, either as objects of sense, or as objects of thought, or as mysteries that transcend the power of reason. Just as the painter's representation of the world has its center in the perceiving eye, the world as we know it has its center in the knowing subject. And if this suggestion that the human being is the center of things known ascribes a quasi-divine creativity to man, this should not seem too surprising, given that according to the Biblical tradition God created man in his own image. Our own being provides us with something like a natural, but contingent measure. Similar reflections lead human beings to place themselves at the center of a boundless space. The space constructed by the painter has its center in the point of view of the observer. This is the

²⁰ Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. and intro. John R. Spencer (New Haven and London: Yale,1956), p.55

²¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Beryllo, Opera Omnia*, vol. XI, ed. Hans G. Sänger and Karl Bormann (Hamburg: Meiner, 1988), p. 6; trans. Jasper Hopkins, *On [Intellectual] Eyeglasses, Nicholas of Cusa: Metaphysical Speculations (Minneapolis: Banning, 1997), p. 37.*

sort of reflection on the power of perspective that also provides a key to the doctrine of learned ignorance to which we shall turn next time.

2. Learned Ignorance

1

I suggested that the work of Nicholas of Cusa helps mark the threshold separating the "Middle Ages" (*media tempestas*) from the modern period. As I mentioned, it was indeed in a eulogy written shortly after the cardinal's death that we hear for the first time the expression Middle Ages. It was used by Giovanni Andrea de Bussi, who from 1458 to 1464 was the cardinal's secretary and appears as a conversation partner in the dialogues *De possest and De li non aliud*. The eulogy is part of a dedicatory letter addressed to Pope Pius II of an edition of Apuleius that he brought out in 1469.

On Learned Ignorance, the first and most significant of Cusanus' philosophical works, was finished in Kues (Cusa) on February 12, 1440. As the author's concluding letter to Cardinal Julian Cesarini informs us, the fundamental thought is said to have come to him while at sea (winter 1437/38), returning from Greece, where he had worked for the reunification of the Roman and the Greek churches.

The Author's Letter to Lord Cardinal Julian

Receive now, Reverend Father, the things which I have long desired to attain by various doctrinal-approaches but could not — until, while I was at sea en route back from Greece, I was led (by, as I believe, a heavenly gift from the Father of lights, from whom comes every excellent gift) to embrace — in learned ignorance and through a transcending of the incorruptible truths which are humanly knowable — incomprehensible things incomprehensibly. Thanks to Him who is Truth, I have now expounded this [learned ignorance] in these books, which, [since they proceed] from [one and] the same principle, can be condensed or expanded. $(158; 263)^{22}$

Johannes Wenck, who had studied at Paris and taught at Heidelberg, will pick up on this: This man of learned ignorance glories, telling the Cardinal that at sea, on his return from Greece, and being guided by supernal light, he found what he formerly had striven after by way of various doctrinal

paths. And further specifying that which he found, he says: ... in order that I might embrace — in learned ignorance and through a transcending of the incorruptible truths which are humanly knowable incomprehensible things incomprehensibly. He says that thanks to Him who is Truth he has expounded this [learned ignorance] in three books. Yet, that disciple whom Jesus loved exhorts us, in his first letter, chapter 4, not to believe every spirit but to test the spirits [in order to determine] whether they are from God. And he adds the reason why this is necessary: "because many false prophets have gone out into the world." Of which prophets the apostle, in II Corinthians 1 says, speaking more specifically: "[they are] false apostles, deceitful workmen, who transform themselves into apostles of Christ." Among whose number is, perhaps, this man of learned ignorance, who under the guise of religion cunningly deceives those not yet having trained senses. For the teachings of the Waldensians, Eckhartians, and Wycliffians have long shown from what spirit this learned ignorance proceeds. $(IL 22)^{23}$

The state of being at sea recalls that of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, when he first speaks of the doctrine of the eternal recurrence. I will indeed suggest, following a hint provided by Hans Blumenberg, that there is a certain similarity between the coincidence of opposites, the central thought of On Learned Ignorance, and that of the Eternal Recurrence. Both are monstrous, as Cusanus himself suggests in the prologue. Both raise the question of the place of the monstrous in philosophical discourse.

The concluding letter is addressed to Cardinal Julian Cesarini (1398 - 1444) as is the Prologue. Cesarini may well have been one of Cusanus' teachers at Padua. He presided over the Council of Basel, where their paths crossed once again.

²² References are to Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance. A translation and appraisal of* De Docta Ignorantia (Minneapolis: Manning Oress, 1981), followed by references to the Critical Edition published by Felix Meiner, Hamburg).

²³ References are to Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Debate with John Wenck.* A translation and appraisal of De Ignota Littertatura [IL] and Apologia Doctae Ignirantiae [AP].

2

The prologue is organized around the theme of wonder (*admiratio, admirari*). By choosing this theme Cusanus refers the reader back to Aristotle. I cited the relevant passage last time:

It is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize; they wondered originally at obvious difficulties, then advanced, little by little and stated difficulties about the greater matters, e.g. about the phenomena of the moon and those of the sun and the stars, and about the genesis of the universe.

Philosophy has its origin in dislocation, in a leave-taking from what is ready to hand, from the everyday world and its concerns. This leave-taking must render philosophy problematic. And it becomes especially problematic given the author's self-proclaimed foolishness. ("Foreigner's foolishness," "*barbaras ineptias*")

The theme of wonder raises the suspicion that such wonder is linked to a curiosity that leads human beings away from what needs doing, beyond the limits set to them by their God-given nature. By calling attention to the novelty of the title, to the unusual, perhaps even monstrous things (*monstra*) found in this book, Cusanus himself invites thus the charge raised by Wenck:

From an innate desire for health the minds of my readers will be vigilant with regard even to this Unknown Learning. With spiritual weapons, however, I am going to rebut certain statements from Learned Ignorance-— [rebut them] as being incompatible with our faith, offensive to devout minds, and vainly leading away from obedience to God. At the head of what must be said comes the [command] in Psalms 45 ("Be still and see that I am God") as being the legitimate enlistment of all our mental activity. For if I behold the mind of the prophet: after the elimination of malevolent wars, which are repugnant to our God, and, moreover, after the weapons of treachery have been broken and knowledge is to be had of Christ, our peacemaker and defender, then comes the command "Be still and see that I am God." For He envisioned certain who were free to spend time in the Lord's vineyard and who are accused in Matthew 20: "Why do you stand here all day idle?" Very many see — not unto salvation, the end

of our faith, but with regard to curiosity and vanity. (IL 21) If unusual, monstrous things are likely to move us, is this to say that they will move us as we should be moved?

3

The first chapter introduces us to the crucial question suggested by the title: *De Docta Ignorantia*. How is it that knowing (*scire*) can be not-knowing, ignorance (*ignorare*). In this connection we should perhaps address the question Hopkins raises in his introduction: how is the title of the book to be understood.

The fulcrum of Nicholas's system is the doctrine of *docta ignorantia*—the very doctrine reflected in the title of the work. But what exactly is this doctrine? And how is the title to be best construed'? Paul Wilpert, in the opening note to his German translation of Book One, maintains that the title is more correctly translated as "Die belehrte Unwissenheit" than as "Die gelehrte Unwissenheit." By contrast, Erich Meuthen opts for the word "gelehrt" and for the title "Das gelehrte Nicht-Wissen." Wilpert feels that the unknowing which Nicholas discusses is not so much an erudite or a wise unknowing (i.e., an unknowing which confers a kind of erudition or wisdom on the one who does not know) as it is simply a recognition-of-limitedness that has been achieved (i.e., an unknowing which has been learned, so that the one who has learned of his unknowing is now among the instructed, rather than remaining one of the unlearned). (2)

The concluding letter and the title of the first chapter "How it is that knowing is notknowing: suggests that *gelehrte* might be better than *belehrte*. So understood the title gestures towards Cusanus' embrace of the coincidence of opposites.

But let us consider this chapter in detail:

We see that by the gift of God there is present in all things a natural desire to exist in the best manner in which the condition of each thing's nature permits this. And [we see that all things] act toward this end and have instruments adapted thereto. They have an innate sense of judgment which serves the purpose of knowing. [They have this] in order that their desire

not be in vain but be able to attain rest in that [respective] object which is desired by the propensity of each thing's own nature. But if perchance affairs turn out otherwise, this [outcome] must happen by accident — as when sickness misleads taste or an opinion misleads reason. (49 - 50; 2)

All beings are governed by the desire to attain the best possible state.

Wherefore, we say that a sound, free intellect knows to be true that which is apprehended by its affectionate embrace. (The intellect insatiably desires to attain unto the true through scrutinizing all things by means of its innate faculty of inference.) Now, that from which no sound mind can withhold assent is, we have no doubt, most true. (50; 2)

I would underscore the words sound or healthy (*sanus*) and free (*liber*). The mark of truth is our inability to withhold our assent. Truth binds the free intellect. Truth and necessity go together. That is to say necessity and freedom go together. But does truth, so understood, ever mark our knowledge?

> However, all those who make an investigation judge the uncertain proportionally, by means of a comparison with what is taken to be certain, (50; 2)

All who investigate judge the uncertain proportionally (*proportionaliter*). *Comparativa igitur est omnis inquisitio medio proportionis utens*. Hopkins has a footnote, calling attention to the importance of these terms. In *De li non aliud* Cusanus will say instead of *proportio definitio*. Consider: What is this? This is a cow. The unknown is made definite, by being brought into a **definite relation** to the known. I take its measure. Knowing is a measuring. In his disalogue *Idiota de mente* will thus link *Mens* (Mind), *mensura* (measure), and *mensurare* (measuring).

Now, when, the things investigated are able to be compared by means of a close proportional tracing back to what is taken to be [certain], our judgment apprehends easily; but when we need many intermediate steps, difficulty arises and hard work is required. These points are recognized in mathematics, where the earlier propositions are quite easily traced back to the first and most evident principles but where later propositions [are traced back] with more difficulty because [they are traced back] only through the mediation of the earlier ones. (50; 2)

The most obvious way of measuring is applying a ruler or weighing. These activities serve indeed in the dialogue *Idiota de Mente* as paradigm. Mathematics provides the obvious key. Think of counting.

The following sentence provides a key to the doctrine of learned ignorance: The infinite must remain unknown. It cannot be reached by such inevitably finite steps. Think once more of counting and the impossible thought of the largest number.

Therefore, every inquiry proceeds by means of a comparative relation, whether an easy or a difficult one. Hence, the infinite, qua infinite, is unknown; for it escapes all comparative relation. (50; 3)

As measuring, knowing is essentially finite. From this it follows that we cannot know the infinite, i.e. we cannot know God. But in order to say even that we must have some insight into the infinite. Reflection on the finitude of knowledge presupposes that there is something in us that allows us to transcend this limitation: allows us to embrace the unknowable unknowingly, so that our ignorance becomes learned.

Number is understood by Cusanus as the presupposition of all comparative relations.

But since comparative relation indicates an agreement in some one respect and, at the same time, indicates an otherness, it cannot be understood independently of number. Accordingly, number encompasses all things related comparatively. Therefore, number, which is a necessary condition of comparative relation, is present not only in quantity but also in all things which in any manner whatsoever can agree or differ either substantially or accidentally. Perhaps for this reason Pythagoras deemed all things to be constituted and understood through the power of numbers. (50; 3)

Cusanus here would appear here to have Aristotle in mind:

Meta. A 5 985b26ff: Contemporaneously with these philosophers and before them (Leucippus and Democritus), the Pythagoreans, as they are called, devoted themselves to mathematics; they were the first to advance this study, and having been brought up in it they thought its principles were the principles of all things. Since of these principles numbers are by

nature the first... they supposed the elements of number to be the elements of all things.

The chapter concludes with a reference to those who before him have recognized the elusiveness of truth, where the reference to Aristotle is of special interest:

Meta II, 1, beginning:

The investigation of the truth is in one way hard, in another easy. An indication of this is found in the fact that no one is able to attain the truth adequately, while, on the other hand, no one fails it entirely, but everyone says something true about the nature of things, and while individually they contribute little or nothing to the truth, by the union of all a considerable amount is amassed. Therefore, since the truth seems to be like the proverbial door, which no one can fail to hit, in this way it is easy, but the fact that we can have a whole truth and not the particular part we aim at shows the difficulty of it. (Take for example knowing that you are ill, but not what ails you.)

Perhaps, as difficulties are of two kinds, the cause of the present difficulty is not in the facts but in us. For as the eyes of the bats are to the blaze of day, so is the reason in our souls to the things which are by nature most evident of all.

The book concludes with an assertion that learned ignorance, an awareness of the limits of our finite understanding, an awareness that aware of these limits, however, embraces what lies beyond, is the goal of our knowledge.

4

Chapter Two provides an overview of the work. It is thus necessarily a very sketchy chapter and we may well feel frustrated by such sketchiness.

The focus is provided by the idea of the maximum. We are told that in this work the maximum will be discussed in three ways: the first book investigates Absolute Maximality, i. e the infinite God; the second book the maximum contracted in plurality, i.e. as the boundless universe; the third book the most perfect of entities, i. e. Jesus.

The transition to this second chapter seems a bit forced:

Since I am going to discuss the maximum learning of ignorance, I must deal with the nature of Maximality. Now, I give the name "Maximum" to that than which there cannot be anything greater. But fullness befits what is one. Thus, oneness — which is also being — coincides with Maximality. But if such oneness is altogether free from all relation and contraction, obviously nothing is opposed to it, since it is Absolute Maximality. Thus, the Maximum is the Absolute One which is all things. (51; 5)

These few sentences unfold the being of the absolute maximum. Very condensed they are unpacked by the first book as a whole. Still let us consider what sense we can make of what Cusanus has to say: In what sense is the Absolute Maximum the Absolute One?

And because it is absolute, it *is*, actually, every possible being; it contracts nothing from things, all of which [derive] from it. In the first book I shall strive to investigate incomprehensibly — above human reason — this Maximum, which the faith of all nations indubitably believes to be God. [I shall investigate] with the guidance of Him "who alone dwells in inaccessible light." (51, 5)

How are we to understand this "is"? Do all possible things participate in the One as in some superentity? And why does fulness befit the One? The Absolute maximum falls outside the order which permits a greater or a less, as it falls outside all opposition. But this would mean that we cannot make sense of it as a thing, as an entity. But then it should be clear that the thought of the maximum is inevitably a monstrous thought.

This is heady stuff. Hopkins calls the reasoning specious, but could it be anything but specious?

Of interest are Wenck's attacks on the fundamental view; they seem to me not altogether unrelated to Hopkins' reading and objections.

This thesis is alluded to by Meister Eckhart in the vernacular book which he wrote for the queen of Hungary, sister of the dukes of Austria — [a book] which begins: "*Benedictus Deus et pater Domini nostri Ihesu Christi*." [Here Eckhart] says: "A man ought to be very attentive to (1) despoiling and divesting himself of his own image and [of the image] of each creature, and to (2) knowing no father except God alone. [For] then

there will be nothing which can sadden or disturb him — not God, not a creature, not any created thing or any un-created thing. [For] his whole being, living, apprehending, knowing, and loving will be *from God, in God*, and *God*." And in his sermons he [says]: "In the soul there is a certain citadel which sometimes I have called the guardian of the soul, sometimes the spark [of the soul]. It is very simple — as God is one and simple. It is so simple and so beyond every measure that God cannot view [it] according to measure and personal properties. And if it were to behold God, then this would be evident: viz., that He [is beyond] all His divine names and personal properties, because He is without measure and property. Now, insofar as God is one and simple and without measure and property, insofar as He is neither Father nor Son nor Holy Spirit, He can enter into this one thing which I am calling the citadel."

See what great evils swarm and abound in such very simple learned ignorance and such very abstract understanding. (26; 25)

Wenck also remarks that there could be no proofs of what is asserted. Consider also the corollaries on p. 27.

In his reply Cusanus denies ever having said that all things coincide with God, thus refusing the charge of pantheism. Wenck's misunderstanding would seem to be based on his failure to become learned about the limits of the human understanding. The fictional author of the Apology sums up Wenck's charge:

> I continued with the reading — [reading aloud the passage] where our adversary says: I come now — through theses and corollaries — more specially to his statements. First thesis: All things coincide with God. This is evident because He is the Absolute Maximum, which cannot be comparatively greater and lesser. Therefore, nothing is opposed to Him. Consequently, God — on account of an absence of division — is the totality of things. And no name can properly befit Him, because the bestowal of a name is based upon the determinate quality of that upon which the name is bestowed. Meister Eckhart alludes to this [thesis]. (AP 57)

This reply is interesting also for what it has to say about Cusanus' relationship to Meister Eckhart:

[Our adversary] adds that the bishop of Strasburg condemned those who were asserting (1) that God is, formally, all things and (2) that they were God — not being distinct [from Him] in nature. Then, attacking the supporting reason, he says: if there were neither distinction nor opposition of relations in God, what would follow would be altogether absurd; for in that case the [doctrine of] the Trinity would be abolished, etc. Whereto the Teacher [responded]: "Should not this falsifier be ridiculed rather than refuted? Why does he not state the place where this thesis is found in the books of Learned Ignorance?"

And I: "He was unable to state [the place] because [this thesis] is nowhere found [there]. For I have read very carefully and do not recall ever having found [the statement] that all things coincide with God. In the second [book] of Learned Ignorance I did indeed find [the statement] that the creation is neither God nor nothing. I do not understand what our adversary means; and perhaps he does not understand his own [meaning]. For I have found it to be necessary (and this is what I did [there] read) that all the divine attributes coincide in God and that all of theology is arranged in a circle, so that in God justice is goodness, and conversely, (and similarly for the other attributes). All the saints who have considered the infinite simplicity of God agree about this point." (AP 57)

I have already suggested that the general difficulty is tied to the way Wenck reads Cusanus. To make sense in his fashion of what Cusanus has to say, he has to misunderstand him. But is there another way of making sense? What Cusanus can say of Eckhart, that he wrote in a way that invited misunderstanding, must also be said of his own *On Learned Ignorance*. But once more: How is it to be understood? How are all things in the maximum and the maximum in all things? Consider: all things are in God and God is in all things.

The first book will take up these questions.

I will just briefly read the characterizations of the second and third books. They will be unpacked later.

Secondly, just as Absolute Maximality is Absolute Being, through which all things are that which they are, so from Absolute Being there exists a universal oneness of being which is spoken of as "a maximum deriving from the Absolute [Maximum]" — existing from it contractedly and as a universe. This maximum's oneness is contracted in plurality, and it cannot exist without plurality. Indeed, in its universal oneness this maximum encompasses all things, so that all the things which derive from the Absolute [Maximum] are in this maximum and this maximum is in all [these] things. Nevertheless, it does not exist independently of the plurality in which it is present, for it does not exist without contraction, from which it cannot be freed. In the second book I will add a few points about this maximum, viz., the universe. (51; 6) Thirdly, a maximum of a third sort will thereafter be exhibited. For since the universe exists-in-plurality only contractedly, we shall seek among the many things the one maximum in which the universe actually exists most greatly and most perfectly as in its goal. Now, such [a maximum] is united with the Absolute [Maximum], which is the universal end; [it is united] because it is a most perfect goal, which surpasses our every capability. Hence, I shall add some points about this maximum, which is

both contracted and absolute and which we name J*esus*, blessed forever. [I shall add these points] according as Jesus Himself will provide inspiration. (51; 7)

5

The first two chapters have been introductory. Only with the third chapter does the discussion get really underway. The chapter begins with the assertion of the gap that separates the infinite and the finite: something like an ontological difference is here asserted.

It is self-evident that there is no comparative relation of the infinite to the finite. (52; 9)

The maximum is by its very nature infinite. With finite things you can always imagine something greater or less.

Therefore, it is most clear that where we find comparative degrees of greatness, we do not arrive at the unqualifiedly Maximum; for things which are comparatively greater and lesser are finite; but, necessarily, such a Maximum is infinite. Therefore, if anything is posited which is not the unqualifiedly Maximum, it is evident that something greater can be posited. And since we find degrees of equality (so that one thing is more equal to a second thing than to a third, in accordance with generic, specific, spatial, causal, and temporal agreement and difference among similar things), obviously we cannot find two or more things which are so similar and equal that they could not be progressively more similar and infinitum. Hence, the measure and the measured — however equal they are — will always remain different. (52; 9)

Important is the insistence on the essential difference between measure and measured. Some understanding of the gap between infinite and finite is constitutive of our understanding of things. (Cf. the distinction between appearance and thing in itself.) The epistemological consequences are unpacked in the second paragraph:

> Therefore, it is not the case that by means of likenesses a finite intellect can precisely attain the truth about things. For truth is not something more or something less but is something indivisible. Whatever is not truth cannot measure truth precisely. (By comparison, a non-circle [cannot measure] a circle, whose being is something indivisible.) Hence, the intellect, which is not truth, never comprehends truth so precisely that truth cannot be comprehended infinitely more precisely. For the intellect is to truth as [an inscribed] polygon is to [the inscribing] circle. The more angles the inscribed polygon has the more similar it is to the circle. However, even if the number of its angles is increased ad infinitum, the polygon never becomes equal [to the circle] unless it is resolved into an identity with the circle. Hence, regarding truth, it is evident that we do not know anything other than the following: viz., that we know truth not to be precisely comprehensible as it is. For truth may be likened unto the most absolute necessity (which cannot be either something more or something less than it is), and our intellect may be likened unto possibility.

Therefore, the quiddity of things, which is the truth of beings, is unattainable in its purity; though it is sought by all philosophers, it is found by no one as it is. And the more deeply we are instructed in this ignorance, the closer we approach to truth. (52-53; 10)

Cusanus thus insists on the difference between the divine and the human intellect: The truth could not possibly be other than it is. But whatever we finite knowers know cannot claim such finality. Purity of the intellect would be to know one thing. (Cf. Kierkegaard: *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*.)

3. The Coincidence of Opposites

1

We spent most of the last time on the first two chapters. Both, as we saw, are introductory. Only with the third chapter does the discussion get really underway. Let me briefly return to it here: The chapter states a central theme of *On Learned Ignorance*: **The precise truth is incomprehensible**. The chapter begins with the assertion of what is perhaps its fundamental thought: the insistence on the gap that separates the infinite and the finite: something like an ontological difference is here asserted. I repeat the crucial sentence:

Quoniam ex se manifestum est infiniti ad finitum proportionem non esse, ...

It is self-evident that there is no comparative relation of the infinite to the finite. (52; 7)

Let me say just a bit more about the word *proportio*,²⁴ which play such a central part in medieval discussions of analogy. Hopkins translates it as definite relation. An example would be the ratio 2:4. But such a relation need not be thought of in mathematical terms. A standard medieval example us urine, which is said to be "healthy" by an **analogy of proportion**: i.e. urine is not literally healthy, but is called healthy because it is a sign of health. To understand the meaning of the analogy or metaphor we have to understand the relevant relation and must know what "healthy" signifies. Different is **an analogy of proportionality.** 2:4 = x:y tells me something about the relationship of x and y. Similarly to speak of intellectual vision tells me something in that it asserts that the eye is related to the seen as the intellect is related to the understood. What the analogy leaves unaddressed is in what relationship 2 and x or eye and intellect stand. That requires us to put the two into some sort of relation. But the relationship of the infinite to the finite cannot be captured by such a definite relation. Medieval analogy founders on the reef of the infinite.

²⁴ Perhaps the best introduction to medieval analogy is Cajetan, Tommaso de Vio. *The Analogy of Names*. Trans. Edward Bushinski and Henry Koren (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1953 and 2009

With finite things, Cusanus points out, you can always imagine something greater or less. But the maximum is by its very nature infinite.

we cannot find two or more things which are so similar and equal that they could not be progressively more similar *ad infinitum*. Hence, the measure and the measured — however equal they are — will always remain different. (52; 9)

Cusanus insists on the essential difference between measure and measured. Some understanding of the gap between infinite and finite is constitutive of our understanding of things. The epistemological consequences are unpacked in the second paragraph:

> Therefore, it is not the case that by means of likenesses a finite intellect can precisely attain the truth about things. For truth is not something more or something less but is something indivisible. Whatever is not truth cannot measure truth precisely. (By comparison, a non-circle [cannot measure] a circle, whose being is something indivisible.) (52; 10)

The truth could not possibly be other than it is. An understanding of the truth would thus be definitive and necessary. But whatever we know about things cannot claim such finality. Possession of the truth about creation is denied to us finite knowers.

2

Chapter Four has the title: **The Absolute Maximum, with which the Minimum coincides, is understood incomprehensibly**. The discussion begins with a reiteration of the incomprehensibility of the Absolute Maximum:

Since the unqualifiedly and absolutely Maximum (than which there cannot be a greater) is greater than we can comprehend (because it is Infinite Truth), we attain unto it in no other way than incomprehensibly. For since it is not of the nature of those things which can be comparatively greater and lesser, it is beyond all that we can conceive. (53; 11)

A corollary of this is that there can be no greatest similarity between two things. Such similarity would be equality. But maximum equality, like absolute maximality, surpasses all understanding. Every finite thing could be other than it is. But this is not true of the absolute maximum. It could not be other than it is. It is altogether actual. Or, should we rather say, in it possibility and actuality coincide in that it is all that it could possibly be?

For whatsoever things are apprehended by the senses, by reason, or by intellect differ both within themselves and in relation to one another — [differ] in such way that there is no precise equality among them. 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, it is *altogether* actual. (53; 11)

The maximum, as we saw, falls outside the realm of greater or less. It follows that in so far as the minimum, too, is a maximum, it will coincide with the maximum.

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. (53; 11)

With this we have arrived at the **coincidence of opposites**.

To clarify this thought Cusanus turns to quantity.

The foregoing [point] will become clearer to you if you contract maximum and minimum to quantity. For maximum quantity is maximally large; and minimum quantity is maximally small. Therefore, if you free maximum and minimum from quantity — by mentally removing large and small you will see clearly that maximum and minimum coincide. For maximum is a superlative just as minimum is a superlative. Therefore, it is not the case that absolute quantity is maximum quantity rather than minimum quantity; for in it the minimum is the maximum coincidingly. (53; 11)

The absolute is beyond the opposition of great and small. But if the minimum coincides with the maximum, it will be beyond all opposition. The *ratio*, reason, cannot help but think in oppositions. It follows that reason is unable to think the absolute. On the reef of the infinite reason founders. At this point all discourse about the maximum, i.e. about God, threatens to dissolve: God, so understood, would seem to be beyond all affirmation and all negation. Neither positive nor negative theology can do justice to His being.

Therefore, opposing features belong only to those things which can be comparatively greater and lesser; they befit these things in different ways; [but they do] not at all [befit] the absolutely Maximum, since it is beyond all opposition. Therefore, because the absolutely Maximum is absolutely

and actually all things which can be (and is so free of all opposition that the Minimum coincides with it), it is beyond both all affirmation and all negation. (53; 12)

All conceptions of God seem thus to be swallowed by the abyss of the infinite. For example, to say "God, who is Absolute Maximality, is light" is [to

say] no other than "God is maximally light in such way that He is minimally light." For Absolute Maximality could not be actually all possible things unless it were infinite and were the boundary of all things and were unable to be bounded by any of these things — as, by the graciousness of God, I will explain in subsequent sections. (54; 12)

Cusanus is well aware that the discourse of reason (*discursus rationis*) will not be able to make sense of the coincidence of opposites. That incomprehensible seeing that recognizes the maximum to be infinite surpasses reason.

However, the [absolutely Maximum] transcends all our understanding (*intellectus*). For our intellect cannot, by means of reasoning (*ratio*), combine contradictories in their Beginning, since we proceed by means of what nature makes evident to us. Our reason falls far short of this infinite power and is unable to connect contradictories, which are infinitely distant. Therefore, we see (*videmus*) incomprehensibly, beyond all rational inference (*rationis discursus*), that Absolute Maximality (to which nothing is opposed and with which the Minimum coincides) is infinite. But "maximum" and "minimum," as used in this [first] book, are transcendent terms of absolute signification, so that in their absolute simplicity they encompass — beyond all con-traction to quantity of mass or quantity of power — all things. (54; 12)

That we can see incomprehensibly presupposes that reason does not limit our sight. Cusanus asserts that we are capable of transcending reason. Aristotelian logic is thought to rule our reason, but not our intellect in its entirety.

3

Chapter Five: The Maximum is one

As the absolute maximum cannot rationally be grasped, but is understood only incomprehensibly (where there is a question of how we are to understand this "in" in "incomprehensibly" and how we are to understand "*comprehendere*"), so it cannot be named, except unnameably. But what kind of a discourse is this unnameable naming? Responsible discourse about things presupposes a world of objects that could be greater or less.

Anything than which a greater or a lesser cannot be posited cannot be named. (54; 13)

That is to say, it will not find a place in linguistic or logical space. But to be for us, must it not find its place in such a space? Are language and logic not constitutive of things? As the poet Stefan George, whom Heidegger liked to quote, puts it: *kein ding sei wo das wort gebricht,* "where the word is lacking, no thing may be." God, the absolute maximum, certainly is not in that sense, Cusanus insists. This raises a question abut the meaning of "being." What do I mean when I say 'God is'?

For by the movement of our reason names are assigned to things which, in terms of comparative relation, can be comparatively greater or lesser. And since all things exist in the best way they are able to exist, there cannot be a plurality of beings independently of number. For if number is removed, the distinctness, order, comparative relation, and harmony of things cease; and the very plurality of beings ceases. (54; 13)

Number is constitutive of the space of things. It rules in the world disclosed to us by our reason.

But if number itself were infinite — in which case it would be actually maximal and the minimum would coincide with it — all of these would likewise cease, since to be infinite number and to be minimally number [i.e., not at all to be number] amount to the same thing. (54; 13)

Naming, as Cusanus understands it, is like measuring. All naming can be more or less adequate to the thing named.

On Learned Ignorance

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From naming Cusanus turns to numbering, which he takes to be constitutive of naming. When counting I can go on *ad infinitum*. But the same, according to Cusanus, does not hold when I descend on the number scale:

Therefore, if in ascending the scale of numbers we actually arrive at a maximum number, since number is finite, still we do not come to a maximum number than which there can be no greater number; for such a number would be infinite. Therefore, it is evident that the ascending number-scale is actually finite, and that the [arrived at maximum number] would be in potentiality relative to another [greater] number. But if on the descending scale a similar thing held true of number, so that for any actually posited small number a smaller number were always positable by subtraction just as on the ascending scale a larger number *[is always*] positable] by addition, [then the outcome] would still be the same [as in the case where number were infinite]. For there would be no distinction of things; nor would any order or any plurality or any degrees of comparatively greater and lesser be found among numbers; indeed there would not be number. Therefore, in numbering, it is necessary to come to a minimum than which there cannot be a lesser, viz., oneness. And since there cannot be anything lesser than oneness, oneness will be an unqualifiedly minimum, which, by virtue of the considerations just presented, coincides with the maximum. (54-55; 13)

The minimum and *principium* of number is oneness. Number is understood as generated from the one. Note that Cusanus speaks here of *unitas*, not of *unum*, of oneness, not of one. Oneness is said the beginning of number which coincides with the end (*principium* and *finis*). We might inquire into the difference between the number one and the *principium unitas*. That Cusanus has a very different understanding of one than we do should be apparent from the text. We have no difficulty subtracting a number from one. So understood one would not be a minimum. Cusanus has a different understanding, We may want to distinguish between the **transcendental one**, which characterizes all that exists, the largest and the smallest and also every number and **one as number**, which is like a particular thing, a number among numbers. Cusanus understands one as the number that bridges this divide. Do we have in the relationship of the transcendental one

to the number one a figure of the relationship of Father and Son who are both two and one? (Cf. the later discussion of the Trinity.)

Cusanus hopes to have made sense of the infinite oneness of God.

See that by means of number we have been led to understanding (1) that "Absolute Oneness" quite closely befits the unnamable God and (2) that God is so one that He is, actually, everything which is possible. Accordingly, Absolute Oneness cannot be comparatively greater or lesser; nor can it be multiple. Thus, Deity is Infinite Oneness. Therefore, he who said "Hear, 0 Israel, your God is one" (Deut. 6:4) and "Your Father and Teacher in Heaven is one" (Matt. 23:8) could not have spoken more truly. (55; 14)

Chapter Six: The Maximum is Absolute Necessity

Hopkins considers this a curious chapter, perhaps the nadir of the entire treatise. The chapter begins in expected fashion by contrasting the limited and bounded with the maximum, reiterating Cusanus' version of the ontological difference.

> In the preceding I indicated that everything except the one unqualifiedly Maximum is — in contrast to it (*eius respectu*) — limited and bounded. Now, what is finite and bounded has a beginning point and an end point. (15)

The following sentence is rather unclear:

And we cannot make the following claim: viz., that "one given finite thing is greater than another given finite thing, [the series of finite things] always proceeding in this way unto infinity." (For there cannot actually be an infinite progression of things which are comparatively greater and lesser, since in that case the Maximum would be of the nature of finite things). (15)

I have trouble with the translation. The Latin reads:

Et quia non potest dici quod illud sit maius dato finito et finitum ita semper in infinitum progrediendo, quoniam in excedentibus et excessis in infinitum actu fieri non potest, alias maximum esset de natura finitorum, igitur necesario est maximum actu omnium finitorum principium et finis.
The question is: what does *illud* refer to here? I take it to refer to that which is the beginning and end of every finite thing. Read in this way, this amounts to an affirmation of the ontological difference, the abyss separating finite and infinite. But if, as Cusanus hopes to have shown, the one coincides with the maximum then, as oneness is the beginning and end of all number, so the Actually Maximum is the beginning and end of all that is finite. Something that looks rather like a proof of the existence of God follows:

Accordingly, it follows that the actually Maximum is the Beginning and the End of all finite things.

Moreover, nothing could exist if the unqualifiedly Maximum did not exist. For since everything nonmaximal is finite, it is also originated. But, necessarily, it will exist from another. Otherwise — i.e., if it existed from itself — it would have existed when it did not exist. Now, as is obviously the rule, it is not possible to proceed to infinity in beginnings and causes. So it will be the case that the unqualifiedly Maximum exists, without which nothing can exist. (55-56; 15)

In what sense then can God be said to be the cause, the *principium*, of creation. Descartes was asked this question by Arnauld and answers that our traditional understanding of cause will not do: When I say God is the cause of creation I use the term that stands in the same relation to efficient causation as the circle is to the inscribed polygon. Although Cusanus is not mentioned, we know that Descartes was familiar with *De docta ignorantia*. The following consideration is analogous:

Furthermore, let us contract maximum to being, and let us say: it is not the case that anything is opposed to maximum being; hence, neither not-being nor minimally being [are opposed to it]. How, then since minimally being is maximally being — could we rightly think that the Maximum is able not to exist? Moreover, we cannot rightly think that something exists in the absence of being. But Absolute Being cannot be other than the absolutely Maximum. Hence, we cannot rightly think that something exists in the absence of the [absolutely] Maximum. (56; 16)

A puzzling paragraph follows. What is Cusanus trying to say here? It does indeed invite Hopkins harsh judgment:

Moreover, the greatest truth is the absolutely Maximum. Therefore, (1) it is most greatly true either that the unqualifiedly Maximum exists or that it does not exist, or (2) [it is most greatly true that it] both exists and does not exist, or (3) [it is most greatly true that it] neither exists nor does not exist. Now, no more [alternatives] can be either asserted or thought. No matter which one of them you say to be most greatly true, my point is made. For I have the greatest truth, which is the unqualifiedly Maximum. (56; 16)

The first sentence make some sense. If truth, as Thomas Aquinas e.g. holds, is the adequacy of intellect and thing, than the greatest truth would be the coincidence of the two. But God is that coincidence.

The following three propositions raise a question about the meaning of being. The first propositions seems unproblematic. It assumes that existence can be applied univocally to God and creatures: either something exists or it does not exist. — But can God be said to exist as a lion or a rose exists?

How is the word "exists" to be understood in this case. By an analogy of proportion? But remember, when a medicine it said to be healthy because it is the cause of health, it is understood that it is not literally healthy: Is this to say then that in the sense in which the lion or the rose exists God does not exist? And conversely, that in the sense in which God exists the lion does not exist. In Meister Eckhart we find that view. He sometimes denies being to God, and sometimes to creatures.

The second proposition could thus be illustrated with Eckhart and his followers.

The third proposition denies the appropriateness of "*esse*" to God altogether. Cusanus now asserts that whatever of these three options you uphold, you have assumed the greatest truth. And so Cusanus concludes:

Wherefore, although it is evident through the aforesaid that the name "being" (*nomen esse*) (or any other name) is not a precise name for the Maximum (which is beyond every name) (Phil. 2:9), nevertheless it is necessary that being befit it maximally (but in a way not nameable by the name "maximum") and above all nameable being. (56; 17)

The struggle with the limits of language is evident. While the name "being" befits (*convenire*) the maximum, it cannot be said to name it. What Cusanus means by "being" calls for further discussion.

Cusanus concludes by saying that it is most true that the Maximum exists as one. By such considerations, as well as by an infinity of similar ones, learned ignorance sees most clearly from the aforesaid that the unqualifiedly Maximum exists necessarily, so that it is Absolute Necessity. But I indicated that the unqualifiedly Maximum cannot exist except as one. Therefore, it is most true that the Maximum exists as one. (56; 17)

4

Chapter Seven: The Trine and One Eternity

Cusanus begins this chapter with the rather difficult to accept claim that there never was a nation that did not worship God and believed him to be absolute Maximum and One. He goes on to point to Pythagoras as a thinker who recognized that the maximum is necessarily trine. As Hopkins, following Paul Wilpert, tells you in his footnote, the reference to Pythagoras is drawn from John of Salisbury.

This and the following three chapters develop this claim. The intention to fit his understanding of the maximum with the Church's understanding of the Trinity is evident, but also may seem to give these chapters a somewhat forced character, although perhaps only to the modern reader — Cusanus no doubt thought that only an understanding of the coincidence of opposites allowed for a proper understanding of the Trinity, of the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which while different persons are yet one God.

What is the philosophical significance of this discussion? Is it to be understood as some sort of proof? This demands discussion. But let me turn to the "argument" of chapter seven:

This argument insists:

- 1) that oneness precedes otherness and is eternal.
- 2) that equality precedes inequality and is eternal.
- 3) that union is prior to separation and is eternal.

Let us look briefly at the three theses:

As we investigate the truth about this [matter] and elevate our intellects more highly, let us assert (in accordance with the aforesaid): No one doubts that that which precedes all otherness is eternal. For otherness is identical with mutability. Now, everything which naturally precedes mutability is immutable and, hence, eternal. But otherness consists of one thing and another. Hence, otherness is subsequent to oneness, just as is number. Therefore, oneness is by nature prior to otherness; and since oneness naturally precedes otherness, it is eternal. (57; 18)

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Since the maximum stands in no relation to another, it could not be other, therefore is not mutable, hence one and eternal.

2) offers fundamentally the same thought:

Moreover, every inequality is composed of an equal and a greater. Therefore, inequality is by nature subsequent to equality — something which can be proven very cogently by means of analysis. For every inequality is analyzable into an equality. For the equal is in between the greater and the lesser. So if you remove that [portion] which is greater, there will be an equal. But if there is a lesser, remove from the other that [portion] which is greater, and an equal will result. And you can continue to do this until, in the process of removing, you come to things simple. Clearly, then, every inequality is, by removing, analyzable into an equality. Therefore, equality naturally precedes inequality. (57; 19)

6 is unequal to seven, but 7 can be analyzed into 7 = 6+1. Preceding inequality equality also precedes otherness. And similar considerations make the case for the third proposition:

Moreover, if there are two causes, one of which is by nature prior to the other, the effect of the prior [cause] will be by nature prior to [the effect] of the subsequent [cause]. Now, oneness (*unitas*) is both union and a cause of union; for the reason things are said to be in union is that they are united (*unita*) together. Likewise, the number two is both separation and a cause of separation; for two is the first separation. Therefore, if oneness is a cause of union and if the number two is [a cause] of separation, then just as oneness is by nature prior to two, so union is by nature prior to separation. But separation and otherness are by nature concomitant. Hence, union is eternal (just as is oneness), since it is prior to otherness. (57; 20)

We should note how Cusanus relies in his speculations on mathematics, even as he warns against uncritical reliance on numbers. But the mathematics he relies on is the mathematics of Neo-Platonism, which would have us understand God as the unfolding One. This invites questions: What justifies it? Should we look for its ground to the nature of the human mind? To the nature of God? Cusanus will address this question explicitly in chapter 11.

Having "proved" that oneness, equality, and union, are eternal, Cusanus concludes that they are one, since there can be no more than one eternal thing.

Chapter Eight: Eternal Generation

The chapter continues the discussion of the Trinity. The key thought is perhaps best captured by calling attention to the difference between "1" and "1, understood as the product of $1 \ge 1$."

When we pay attention to what generation is, we view clearly the generation [[of equality from oneness]]. For generation is the repetition of oneness or the multiplication of the same nature as it proceeds from a father to a son. This latter generation is found only in transient things. However, the generation of oneness from oneness is one repetition of oneness — i.e., is oneness once [i.e., oneness times one]. But if I multiply oneness two times or three times, and so on, oneness will beget from itself another — e g., the number two or the number three or some other number. But oneness once repeated [i.e., oneness times one] begets only equality of oneness; this [repeating] can only be understood as oneness begetting oneness. And this generation is eternal. (58; 23)

But perhaps more interesting is the beginning of the chapter, which as Hopkins informs us, draws on Thierry of Chartres and Clarenbald of Arras.

Let me now show very briefly that equality of oneness is begotten from oneness but that union proceeds from oneness and from equality of oneness.

"Unitas" or "ontas," so to speak (from the Greek word "on," which is rendered in Latin as "ens"); and unitas [oneness] is entitas [being], as it were. For indeed, God is the being of things for He is the Form of being and, hence, is also being. Now, equality of oneness is equality of being, as it were (quasi) (i.e., equality of existing (essendi sive exsistendi)). But equality of existing [i.e., of being (essendi)] is the fact that in a thing there is neither too much nor too little — nothing beyond [measure], nothing below [measure]. For if in a thing there were present too much, [that thing] would be monstrous; and if there were present too little, [that thing] would not even exist. (58: 22)

Chapter Nine: The eternal procession of union

With this chapter Cusanus turns to the third person of the Trinity:

Therefore, union is rightly said to proceed from oneness and from equality of oneness. For union is not merely of one [of these]; rather it proceeds from oneness to equality of oneness and from equality of oneness to oneness. Therefore [union] is rightly said to proceed from both, since it is extended, as it were, from the one to the other. (24)

Of interest is the following explanation:

But we do not say that union is begotten from oneness or from equality of oneness, since union is not from oneness either through repetition or through multiplication. And although equality of oneness is begotten from oneness and although union proceeds from both [of these], nevertheless oneness, equality of oneness, and the union proceeding from both are one and the same thing — as if we were to speak of [one and] the same thing as this, it, the same. (25) The fact of our saying "it" is related to a first thing; but our saying "the same" unites and conjoins the related thing to the first thing. Assume, then, that from the pronoun "it" there were formed the word "itness," so that we could speak of oneness, itness, and sameness: itness would bear a relation to oneness, but sameness would designate the union of itness and oneness. [In this case, the names "Oneness," (*unitas*)" Itness, (*iditas*) and "Sameness (*identitas*)"] would nearly enough befit the Trinity. (25)

This invites closer consideration. "This" relates to a disclosing that just points. What does it points to? To "It," to the One that unfolds itself in creation, i.e. to the creative word, to the logos. But what joins the two, what lets oneness become creative? Love. In Plato's *Symposium* it is love that bridges the abyss that separates the timeless forms and the temporal.

The chapter concludes by addressing the relationship of this discussion to what the church has taught explicitly about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, where Cusanus insists that such talk is "only in relation to creatures."

Chapter Ten: An Understanding of Trinity in Oneness Transcends All Things

The chapter takes for its point of departure a statement by Martian, which Cusanus once again draws from John of Salisbury (c. 1120-1180), who substitutes for philology philosophy.

> Let us now inquire about what Martian is getting at when he says that Philosophy, desiring to ascend unto a knowledge of this Trinity, left behind circles and spheres. (60; 15)

Hopkins's translation is misleadingly tame. *Evomuisse* is translated as "left behind," but *emovere* means "to spit out, to vomit forth." Cusanus points out that the most perfect corporeal figure, the sphere, the most perfect surface figure, the circle, and the most perfect rectilineal figure, the triangle, as well as simple straightness, must be "spit out" if we are to raise ourselves to an understanding of the maximum. Mathematics is needed to provide us a ladder, but in the end, it seems, the ladder must be cast away. How are we to understand that?

Once more Cusanus insists that you have not rightly left the sphere, the circle, and the like behind, unless you understand that maximal oneness is necessarily trine. Why should this be so? To think oneness as maximal is to think it in relation to a realm where we find the greater and the less, to the finite, as *principium*. But to understand the one as principium is to think of it as generative, as procreative.

Cusanus seeks to clarify this by means of what he calls an *exemplum*: Here he appeals to divine understanding:

> To use examples suitable to the foregoing [point]: We see that oneness of understanding is not anything other than that which understands, that which is understandable, and the act of understanding. So suppose you want to transfer your reflection from that which understands to the Maximum and to say that the Maximum is, most greatly, that which understands; but suppose you do not add that the Maximum is also, most greatly, that which is understandable together with being the greatest actual understanding. In that case, you do not rightly conceive of the greatest and most perfect Oneness. For if Oneness is the greatest and most perfect understanding (which without these three mutual relations cannot be either understanding or the most perfect understanding), then whoever

does not attain to the trinity of this Oneness does not rightly conceive of oneness. For oneness is only threeness, since oneness indicates indivision, distinctness, and union. Indeed, indivision is from oneness—as are also distinctness and union (*unio sive conexio*). Hence, the greatest Oneness is not other than indivision, distinctness, and union. Since it is indivision, it is eternity and without beginning. (The eternal is not divided by any-thing.) Since it is distinctness, it is from immutable eternity. And since it is union (*conexio sive unio*), it proceeds from both [indivision and distinctness]. (28)

Next we are invited to reflect on "Oneness is maximal."

Moreover, when I say "Oneness is maximal," I indicate threeness. For when I say "oneness," I indicate a beginning without a beginning; when I say "maximal," I indicate a beginning from a beginning; when I conjoin and unite these two through the word "is," I indicate a pro-cession from both. (29)

5

The need for philosophy to spit out circles and spheres invites, as pointed out, a consideration of the function mathematics and mathematical examples have in Cusanus' discourse. Before I turn to this next time, however, I would like to conclude by taking a closer look at the charge of pantheism that might be leveled against Cusanus and against which he defended himself in his *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*:

"See how it is that he who does not pay attention to the coincidence of unity and trinity has no understanding at all regarding theological matters. Nor does it follow from this [doctrine of coincidence] that the Father is the Son or the Holy Spirit. To [this] stiff-necked man the following cannot occur: viz., that in the coincidence of supreme simplicity and indivisibility, of oneness and trinity, the person of the Father, the person of the Son, and the person of the Holy Spirit are distinct. Words whose significations are not compatible with theology hinder him. For example, when we say that the Father is one person, the Son another person, and the Holy Spirit a third person, 'otherness' cannot retain its [ordinary]

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signification. For this word is under assignment to signify an otherness which is separate and distinct from oneness; and so, there is no otherness unless there is number. However, such otherness cannot at all befit the indivisible Trinity. Hence, a commentator on Boethius's De Trinitate ([a commentator who is] easily the most intelligent man of all those whom I have read) says: 'From the fact that there is no number in God, in whom trinity is oneness (in whom, as Augustine says, if you begin to number, you begin to err), it follows that in God there is no difference in the proper sense of the word. [Hopkins refers us to Pseudo-Bede, Commentarius in *Boetii de Trinitate* {PL 95:404}] ('In the proper sense of the word' means 'in accordance with the word's assignment.') Now, this [point about God] is better understood than it can be expressed, although it is never so perfectly understood that it cannot be more perfectly understood. Whoever desires to ascend unto the divine mode must rise above all imaginable and intelligible modes. For the divine mode, which is the Mode of every mode, is attained only above every mode. For nothing similar to it can occur to our mind — as Paul said most elegantly in Acts 17. For who can conceive of a mode which is indistinctly distinct? — as Athanasius says, 'neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance.' For all the [symbolic] likenesses proposed by the saints (including the most divine Dionysius) are altogether disproportional [to God]; and to all who do not have learned ignorance (i.e., a knowledge of the fact that [the likenesses] are altogether disproportional), [the likenesses] are useless rather than useful. However, in Book One of Learned Ignorance enough (though disproportionally less than could be said) is found stated about these matters—[stated] in the manner in which God has granted it." (AP 57-58; 24)

4. The Threat of Pantheism

1

Let me begin by retuning to the passage with which I concluded the preceding session. Cusanus here defends himself against Wenck's charge of pantheism that *On Leaned Ignorance* does indeed invite. The defense Cusanus presents in his *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* relies on his understanding of the coincidence of opposites. Let me read once more the relevant passage

> "See how it is that he who does not pay attention to the coincidence of unity and trinity has no understanding at all regarding theological matters. Nor does it follow from this [doctrine of coincidence] that the Father is the Son or the Holy Spirit. To [this] stiff-necked man the following cannot occur: viz., that in the coincidence of supreme simplicity and indivisibility, of oneness and trinity, the person of the Father, the person of the Son, and the person of the Holy Spirit are distinct. Words whose significations are not compatible with theology hinder him. For example, when we say that the Father is one person, the Son another person, and the Holy Spirit a third person, 'otherness' cannot retain its [ordinary] signification. For this word is under assignment to signify an otherness which is separate and distinct from oneness; and so, there is no otherness unless there is number. However, such otherness cannot at all befit the indivisible Trinity. Hence, a commentator on Boethius's De Trinitate ([a commentator who is] easily the most intelligent man of all those whom I have read) says: 'From the fact that there is no number in God, in whom trinity is oneness (in whom, as Augustine says, if you begin to number, you begin to err), it follows that in God there is no difference in the proper sense of the word. ('In the proper sense of the word' means 'in accordance with the word's assignment.') Now, this [point about God] is better understood than it can be expressed, although it is never so perfectly understood that it cannot be more perfectly understood. Whoever desires to ascend unto the divine mode must rise above all imaginable and

intelligible modes. For the divine mode, which is the Mode of every mode, is attained only above every mode. For nothing similar to it can occur to our mind — as Paul said most elegantly in Acts 17. For who can conceive of a mode which is indistinctly distinct? — as Athanasius says, 'neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance.' For all the [symbolic] likenesses proposed by the saints (including the most divine Dionysius) are altogether disproportional [to God]; and to all who do not have learned ignorance (i.e., a knowledge of the fact that [the likenesses] are altogether disproportional), [the likenesses] are useless rather than useful. However, in Book One of Learned Ignorance enough (though disproportionally less than could be said) is found stated about these matters— [stated] in the manner in which God has granted it." (Apologia 24)

But to do justice to both Wenck's charge and Cusanus' reply let me return to chapters three to five, which we discussed last time. What holds these chapters together is, as we saw, the insistence on the gap that separates the infinite and the finite: characteristic of something finite or bounded is that you can always imagine something greater or less. But the **maximum is by its very nature infinite**. Important here is the insistence on the essential difference between what is bounding or defining and what is to be bounded or defined. Whatever we understand, say a rose is something that we have bound or defined, for example when we call it a "rose." But in naming it a rose we are responding to the rose, which possesses its unique identity and yet in its infinite particularity inevitably eludes all my linguistic measures. The rose is something both finite and infinite. It is, as Cusanus puts it, a contracted infinite. To have found the true name of the rose, the linguistic expression totally adequate to it, would be to have found the creative divine word. But of that word our discourses inevitably falls short.

2

Let me approach this point, skipping to the early 20th century, by reading you a few passages from a piece by the Austrian poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal, from his *Lord Chandos Letter*, a fictive letter, supposed to have been sent by this young English Lord to Sir Francis Bacon, like Descartes a founding figure of modernity.

The case of Hofmannsthal's fictional Elizabethan Lord is simple: a figure of the Austrian poet, who, when still a teenager, had been celebrated as a master of the German language only to be assailed by Nietzschean doubts concerning the power of language to reveal reality. So the young Lord writes a letter to his older friend, the scientist and philosopher Sir Francis Bacon in an attempt to explain to this founder of our then just emerging modern world his decision to abandon all literary activity. At issue is the rift that the young poet's merely aesthetic play with words has opened up between language and reality:

My case in short is this: I have lost completely the ability to think or to speak of anything coherently.

At first I grew by degrees incapable of discussing a loftier or more general subject in terms of which everyone, fluently and without hesitation, is wont to avail himself. I experienced an inexplicable distaste for so much as uttering the words spirit, soul, or body. ... The abstract terms of which the tongue must avail itself as a matter of course in order to voice a judgment—these terms crumbled in my mouth like mouldy fungi.²⁵

Like a corroding rust this inability to use words, because they have lost touch with what they supposedly are about, spreads to ordinary language, which the Lord experiences increasingly as indemonstrable, mendacious, hollow.

> My mind compelled me to view all things occurring in such conversations from an uncanny closeness. As once, through a magnifying glass, I had seen a piece of skin on my little finger look like a field full of holes and furrows, so I now perceived human beings and their actions. I no longer succeeded in comprehending them with the simplifying eye of habit. For me everything disintegrated into parts, those parts again into parts; no longer would anything let itself be encompassed in one idea. Single words floated round me; they congealed into eyes which stared back at me and into which I was forced to stare back — whirlpools which gave me vertigo and, reeling incessantly, led into the void.²⁶

 ²⁵ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "The Letter of Lord Chandos," *Selected Prose*, trans. Mary Hottinger and Tania and James Stern (New York: Pantheon, 1952), 134-135.
²⁶ Ibid.

But the void left by this disintegration is not completely mute. As language gains an autonomy that threatens to render it meaningless, a minimal, but intense contact with beings is established. The tearing of language by silence grants epiphanies of presence.

It is not easy for me to indicate wherein these good moments subsist; once again words desert me. For it is, indeed, something entirely unnamed, even barely nameable which, at such moments, reveals itself to me, filling like a vessel any casual object of my surroundings with an overflowing flood of higher life. I cannot expect you to understand me without examples, and I must plead your indulgence for their absurdity. A pitcher, a harrow abandoned in a field, a dog in the sun, a neglected cemetery, a cripple, a peasant's hut — all these can become the vessel of my revelation.²⁷

With "a shudder running from the roots of my hair to the marrow of my heels," the young Lord senses the infinite: "What was it that made me want to break into words which, I know, were I to find them, would force to their knees those cherubim in whom I do not believe?"²⁸ⁱ And so they would! For the words for which the Lord is longing would know nothing of the rift separating reality and language. The words of that language would be nothing other than the things themselves. But this is to say: they would have to be the creative words of that God in whom neither the Lord nor Hofmannsthal could believe. Nevertheless, the idea of this divine language functions as a measure that renders our language infinitely inadequate and condemns him who refuses to sully the dream of that language to silence.

Do we have difficulty understanding what Hofmannsthal is saying here? An awareness of the gap that separates things from all that we can say about them would seem to be part of our understanding of the thingliness of things.

3

According to Cusanus, too, some understanding of the gap between infinite and finite is constitutive of our understanding of the being of things.

That makes me think of a passage from Descartes' letter to Clerselier:

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 135 - 136.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 137.

I say that the notion I have of the infinite is in me before that of the finite because, by the mere fact that I conceive being or that which is, without thinking whether it is finite or infinite, what I conceive is infinite being; but in order to conceive a finite being I have to take away something from this general notion of being, which must accordingly be there first.²⁹

As I understand the passage, it is anything but clear and distinct. What does Descartes mean when he speaks of "conceiving being, or that which is, without thinking whether it is finite or infinite" and then adds that in that case he is conceiving infinite being? That is to say that to think being is already to think the infinite — a thought with which Cusanus would very much agree. But he would question the second consideration: "but in order to conceive a finite being I have to take away something from this general notion of being, which must accordingly be there first." This places the finite into a relation of greater or less, i. e. it makes of the infinite an entity. But that is difficult to reconcile with the statement that "by the mere fact that I conceive being, …what I conceive is infinite being." In that case to take away this infinity would be to take away being and that means to end up with nothing. Descartes here runs into what I want to call **the antinomy of being**.³⁰

4

The maximum, as we saw, falls outside the realm of greater or less. It follows that in so far as the minimum, too, is a maximum, **it will coincide with the maximum**, where to see such coincidence we would have to ascend from an understanding of things, of entities, to an understanding of their Being. But if the minimum does indeed coincide with the maximum, it, too, will be beyond all opposition.

The *ratio*, however, cannot help but think in oppositions. At this point all discourse about the maximum, i.e. about God, threatens to dissolve. Wittgenstein might have said in the *Tractatus*: the maximum shows itself, but it cannot be said. And in a

²⁹ Descartes to Clerselier, 23 April 1949, Descartes, *Philosophical Letters*, trans. Anrthony Kenny (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press. 1981), p. 254.

³⁰ See Karsten Harries, *Wahrheit: Die Architektur der Welt* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2012)

way Cusanus might have agreed: God is beyond affirmation and negation. Neither positive nor negative theology do justice to his being. The **discourse of reason** (*discursus rationis*) will not be able to make sense of the coincidence of opposites. **But if so, does not this turn to the coincidence of opposites deny us the very possibility of speaking coherently about God or, for that matter, about anything at all?** Would this not mean the end of theology? This is one of the objections raised by Wenck and it is to his *De Ignota Litteratura* that I would like to return now.

As Hopkins tells you in the introduction, Wenck is a bit older than Cusanus. He had received his Master of Art at the University of Paris in 1414, moved to Heidelberg, where he began to teach in 1426. As I pointed out earlier, he appears to have been a respected member of that faculty, for three times he was elected rector. He also had been a delegate to the Council of Basel, where he and Cusanus ended up on opposite sides. His philosophical allegiances are suggested in his critique of Cusanus, especially by his Aristotelianism, and by his rejection of Meister Eckhart and the mystical tradition associated with him.

The keynote of Wenck's critique is set by his already cited appeal to the command in Psalms 45: "Be still and see that I am God." (19) Cusanus, as we saw, is associated with heretical Waldensians, Eckhartians, and Wycliffians. To his idle speculating Wenck opposes the authority of Scripture, i.e. of words:

In Mark 1 we are commanded by the Savior to believe the Gospel, for it is the indissoluble word of God (John 10: "Scripture cannot be broken"). In Galatians 1 the apostle gives Scriptural teaching precedence over an angelic proclamation: "Although we or an angel from heaven preach to you anything other than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed." Now, the Gospel says in I Corinthians 13 that we understand through a mirror [and] in a symbolism. How, then, in this life would we incomprehensibly apprehend what is incomprehensible? For in this life — in which, according to Boethius, "everything which is received is received in accordance with the mode of the receiver" — it is impossible for man to comprehend in any other way than comprehensibly and in terms of an image. For [as we learn] from De Anima III the image is to the intellect that which color is to sight. Now, it is evident that without the

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objectively activating light of color, sight cannot see anything; therefore, neither does it happen that we understand without an image. 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. (IL 22-23; 21)

Important is the charge that by appealing to the coincidence of opposites Cusanus appears to make himself invulnerable to any responsible criticism:

But in order to escape all calling into question of his arguments, this author of Learned Ignorance resorts to the following stratagem: viz., [he asserts] that in incomprehensibly embracing such deep and incomprehensible matters, the whole effort of our human intelligence elevates itself unto that Simplicity where contradictories coincide. And he says that the conception of his first book labors with this [task]. He calls this Simplicity God — not understanding that which the verse stated: viz., "that I am God," with whom no created thing coincides and with whom nothing from the nature of anything is mingled. Now, if the aforesaid teacher of learned ignorance wants in this way to prevent all opposition, then there will be no contradiction there. And who will refute him, since in that case no inference could be established? For there would be no inconsistency between an antecedent and a consequent opposite to it. What, then, would become of the inferences of our Savior's prophets, evangelists, and apostles by which our faith is seen to be in no small measure confirmed against the infidels? Moreover, such teaching as this author's destroys the fundamental principle of all knowledge: viz., the principle that it is impossible both to be and not to be the same thing. [as we read] in Metaphysics IV. But this man cares little for the sayings of Aristotle. For he says that he *always sets out from [one and] the same* foundation and that he has elicited, beyond the usual approach of the philosophers, [teachings which will seem] unusual to many. Wherefore, [allegedly], the Lord Jesus has been magnified in his understanding and affection through an increase of his faith. (DIL 22-23)

Insistence on the coincidence of opposites is said to destroy the very foundation of knowledge. Later Wenck goes on to suggest that according to this doctrine creatures coincide with the creator. *All things coincide with God*, as Wenck rather carelessly quotes Cusanus (IL 25; 24). Is Cusanus then a pantheist? What sort of things are said by him to coincide? **Does he ever speak of the coincidence of the finite with the infinite**? He does speak of the coincidence of polygon and circle in the infinite circle. And he does speak of the coincidence of the minimum with the maximum because they are both superlative.

But let us consider the charge that the coincidence of opposites destroys the very foundation of knowledge. Let us consider first Cusanus' reply:

When [I had read this] the Teacher laughed and said:

"When he claims that there was added a stratagem which precludes all attack on my writing, he shows that he is moved by an envy against my person. But when he alleges that both the fundamental principle-ofknowledge (which is enfolded in the principle 'every thing either is or is not [the case]') and all inference are destroyed, he is misconceiving. For he fails to notice that learned ignorance is concerned with the mind's eye and with apprehension-by-the-intellect [*intellectibilitas*] — so that whoever is led to the point of seeing ceases from all discursive reasoning, and his evidence comes from sight." (AP 15; 14)

Evidence from sight is contrasted with evidence based on reason. You see what you see. You either see or fail to see. You do not see falsely. Only when sight is mediated by reason can one be said to see falsely. **Seeing** is opposed to **discursive reasoning** as **seeing** is opposed to **hearing**.

> 'He bears witness to what he has seen' — as John the Baptist says of Christ and as Paul says of his own rapture. However, whoever pursues truth on the basis of evidence from hearing — even as we are quite commonly led by faith, which comes as a result of hearing — has need of inference. Hence, if someone were to make the following statement, he would not at all be speaking accurately: 'Since you say that the evidence from seeing is more certain because it proves apart from any rational consideration and any inference, then you are denying that the evidence

from hearing and that all discursive reasoning are of any importance. (AP 51: 14}

At issue is the relation of **ratio** to **intellectus**, the latter understood as a faculty of intellectual sight. A bridge is built from one to the other faculty by the mathematical example: To be able to count is to know that we can always go on. The ratio is haunted by the idea of a maximum which, however, remains unattainable — haunted by the ideas of an **absolute beginning** and an **absolute end**. Trying to seize them it gets entangled in the antinomy of being.

5

But how are we to get hold of the coincidence of opposites? Hopkins' discussion in the preface, where he is criticizing Vincent Martin's "The Dialectical Process in the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa," illustrates the difficulty:

Some of the reasoning [that of Cusanus] — for example the passage in I, 4 about the Maximum coinciding with the Minimum — is so obviously specious that it can only irritate a sensible reader (DW 7)

Does Cusanus in fact say in I, 4 that *the maximum coincides with the minimum*? He certainly does say that *the Minimum coincides with the maximum*:

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. (53, 11)

A certain **asymmetry** is again suggested by

Therefore, because the absolutely Maximum is absolutely and actually all things which can be (and is so free of all opposition that the Minimum coincides with it), it is beyond both all affirmation and all negation. (12)

The thought of the maximum would appear to be given a certain priority over the minimum.

Yet why does this matter?

Let me return to the question: **does the coincidence of opposites deny validity to the principle of non-contradiction**? Cusanus appears to deny this: That principle does indeed govern the *ratio* and thus all rational understanding. One corollary of the

coincidence of opposites is insistence on the total otherness of God to which the *ratio* is unable to do justice. God is not at all like the finite things we know. The coincidence of opposites thus is to give us insight into Cusanus' version of an **ontological difference**, into the **abyss** that separates creator from created, Being for beings.

But so understood God threatens to become simply something infinite in the privative sense of *apeiron*, lacking a measure. But isn't God the measure of all measures, the form of all forms, the *principium*, the *entitas* of every *ens*, the *unitas* of every *unum*? The coincidence of opposites thinks **the coincidence of** *peras* **and** *apeiron*, the bracket that holds creation together and which Plato in the *Symposium* thinks as **eros**. To Greek thought *peras* and *apeiron* remained essentially opposed. But the Christian understanding of God as author of both form and matter cannot accept such opposition. The minimum, the *unum*, expresses the boundedness implied by the idea of perfection, the coincidence of minimum and maximum infinite perfection.

But how then does the doctrine of the coincidence of opposites relate to the *principium contradictionis*? Cusanus himself refers us to this principle to distinguish his own position from that of Aristotle. In Aristotle this principle functions both in **an ontological and an epistemological sense**:

A principle which every one must have who understands anything, is not a hypothesis; and that which everyone must know who knows anything, he must already have when he comes to a special study. Evidently then such a principle is the most certain of all; which principle this is let us proceed to say. It is, that the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect... For it is impossible for anyone to believe the same thing to be and not to be, as some think Heraclitus says. (Met. IV, ch. 3, 1005 19 - 24)

Note that an ontological principle is here founded on our capacity or incapacity to understand or believe anything. The principle of non-contradiction, we can say, is presented as a transcendental principle of being. But, if so, being must be thought as openness to our human understanding.

Cusanus returns to this principle and makes his critique of Aristotle more explicit in both *De beryllo* and *De li non aliud*, two later dialogues. He admits that it is indeed the highest principle of discursive reason (*ratio discurrens*), but not of the *intellectus videns*, the seeing intellect. **To think the coincidence of opposites we must think the limits of discursive reason**. From the point of view of reason we have to say: the infinite is other than the finite, recognizing that as we thus oppose the finite and the infinite, we do violence to the latter.

6

Let me approach this thought of the limits of reason by turning to Cusanus' later discussion of the *non aliud*, the not other, said by him to be the most adequate name of God he has been able to come up with. Why is the earth earth? Cusanus asks: because it is nothing other than the earth. Why is the rose a rose? Consider Angelus Silesius: "*Die Rose ist ohne Warum. Sie blühet, weil sie blühet. Sie achtet nicht ihrer selbst, fragt nicht, ob man sie siehet*. Angelus Silesius invites us to consider the rose not as subject to the principle of sufficient reason. It just blooms. The rose is nothing other than the rose. What is the point of such seemingly empty formulations and what is the point of offering "the not other" as the most adequate name of God, as Cusanus was to do?

Consider the expression: *non aliud.*³¹ In Latin there is a distinction between *alter* and *aliud. Alter* means something like *secundus*, another one. It presupposes a difference and a likeness, a medium in which the comparison is made. Think of counting -2 is one number, 3 another. Or of **definition**. A definition is a proposition that determines what something is. What is a fish? An animal that swims. A good definition gives us a higher genus and the specific difference. It assigns what is to be defined a place in our conceptual space. In *De li non aliud* Cusanus applies this approach also to particulars: what is this? The answer, which we can also consider a definition, makes the "this" **definite** by naming it: This is a rose. To make it definite is inevitably also to oppose it to what it is not. Definition is **heterothesis**. The definition posits something as possessing an identity of its own, it ascribes it a definite character. **Identity and difference are inseparable from definition**.

³¹ Cf. Egil A. Wyller, *Henologische Perspektiven I: Platon – Johannes – Cusanus*, (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1995)

But this suggests that the couple *idem-alter* cannot be fundamental. The very idea of definition presupposes something like a limit that is imposed on the determinable, which is delimited and such delimitation for the first time lets this appear as what it is. Think once again of the number sequence. The opposition of this number and that number, between *idem* and *alter*, has its foundation in the opposition of the measure provided by the number one, which in turn has its foundation in the *unitas or oneness*, thought as the form of every number and indeed every entity and the matter provided by the indeterminate field of the more or less, the *aliud*.

But what now is the point of the non *aliud*? If the *aliud* refers to the determinable indefinite, do not *alter* and *idem* belong to the domain of the *non aliud*?

When we think that way, we think the *non* in terms of the law of identity. How then is the *non* to be thought in *non aliud*? How is *non aliud* to be distinguished from identity?

If every property of x is also a property of y, then x and y are said to be identical. We may prove this by saying that x has the property of being identical with x. If y has all properties of x it must have this property, too.

Is this an acceptable argument? It all depends on whether we can treat being identical with oneself as a property like red. Consider in this connection the difference between **identity** and **equality**. We write the law of identity as A = A. But equality is a non-reflexive relation while identity is reflexive. Instead of saying A has the property of being equal to A, we should say that A is identical with itself; but if this is a property it is a rather odd property that adds nothing to its determination. As Kant said of being, **it has its foundation simply in the thing's being posited**.

I would suggest that for Cusanus two objects that share all their properties, i. e. that demand the same definition, would be identical as far as our reason reaches, perhaps we can say epistemologically identical, but to try to claim an ontological identity would be futile. Here there may be a difference between Leibniz and Cusanus, whom the latter might have accused of not having become sufficiently learned about his ignorance, i e. of having invested the principle of sufficient reason with an authority it cannot claim.

The *idem* is constitutive of whatever has been posited. But consider once more the example of the rose. I see this as a rose. My seeing is also a making definite of what I see. If this "definition" is not to be arbitrary it must have its ground in what I see, in the

reality I experience; it must have an ontological ground. It must have its measure in the seen. But how do I gain access to this measure and ground? By seeing! But is my sight not inescapably structured by my language? And in this sense must the ground that measures my seeing not remain elusive, present itself to me as infinite? It is this elusive ground, elusive as Kant's thing in itself is elusive, that Cusanus names *li non aliud*. The *non aliud* points to **the essentially elusive ontological counterpart of the principle of identity**.

Let me try to clarify its meaning further by asking for the meaning of the *non*. How is it to be understood? In terms of *idem - alter*? If this were so the *non aliud* would be excluded by the *aliud*, but Cusanus tells us that this is not the case: the other, too, is not other than the other: *Aliud est non aliud quam aliud*. The *non aliud* is constitutive of the *aliud*, too, we might say.

Again: how is the *non* to be understood? As long as negation is understood in a way that links it to heterothesis it is not yet understood in its most fundamental sense. To even have a thesis there must be something like a field, an open space, a clearing where I can put my thesis. That field I suggested is provided by the *aliud* understood as the **non-unum**, and here the *non* is to be understood privatively, as in the Greek *apeiron*. The *apeiron* is what lacks *peras*. The *apeiron* is thus grasped by Plato and Aristotle ontologically, as a material cause, as potentiality. Precisely because of this they could not think it as something actual, as a substance for example. The *aliud* is part of a similar attempt to think the open, determinable "material space" that is a presupposition of all determining, of all definition. But if the *apeiron* is the determinable, where does such determination get its direction from? Is it completely arbitrary how something is determined? What makes my determination of this flower as a rose adequate? Heidegger would appeal here to the **earth**. Cusanus answers with the seemingly totally unilluminating: because it is nothing other than a rose. The rose as nothing other than itself is measure and ground of the rose that is posited by my determination. But it is a measure I cannot comprehend, because as soon as I attempt to truly seize it, it eludes me and I arrive only at something I have posited. Again we run up against the **antinomy** of being.

That antinomy is also an **antinomy of knowledge**. On one hand all that presents itself to us does so in what we can call logical or linguistic space. As such everything

that presents itself to us is ruled by the principles of identity and non-contradiction, subjected to the measures provided by our concepts and names. Cusanus might speak here of the realm of the **ratio discurrens**. We might want to speak of a logical or linguistic space. Reason and its mode of operation are constitutive of finite being. On the other hand, if my positing or my definition is not to be arbitrary, if there is to be truth, reality must transcend our positing, which requires an extra-linguistic ground. And yet when I attempt to think that reality, I find myself once more within some linguistic or conceptual space. Cusanus responds to this difficulty by thinking this extra-linguistic ground, incomprehensibly, as the *non aliud*, and in *Learned Ignorance*, as the maximum with which the minimum coincides and which he identifies with God. Both formulations point to something like a groundless ground. Thus they point out a way between foundationalism and scepticism.

After this excursus there should not be much need to address the charge of pantheism. Cusanus insists on the infinite distance that separates creatures and God even as he will say that in God all creatures coincide and are one. But this is hardly an answer with which the orthodox should have any difficulty. It is indeed the sort of answer demanded by the orthodox understanding of God as he creator of all things.

5. The Power of Mathematics

1

Last time I related Cusanus' discussion of the maximum with which the minimum coincides to his later discussion of the Not Other, the *Non Aliud*. The comparison is invited by the following remark in Chapter 22 of *De li non aliud*:

I certainly do not mean that "Not other" is the name of Him whose name is above every name. Rather through Not-other I disclose to you my concept of the First. There does not occur to me any more precise name which expresses my concept of the Unnameable, which is indeed not other than anything.

The name "non aliud" should thus be compared with the name "infinite." Remember that Cusanus had suggested that in the realm of the finite we never meet with a minimum or a maximum. Everything could be greater or less. That is to say, whatever finite reality presents itself to us, presents itself to us as **possibly other** than it is, in the mode of the **aliud.** *Non aliud* points to the same as the expression "in-finite."

A footnote: Kant's discussion of the sublime in the *Critique of Judgment* seems to me relevant in this connection:

par. 25: the sublime is that in comparison with which everything else is small. Here we easily see that nothing can be given in nature, however great it is judged to be, which could not, if considered in another relation, be reduced to the infinitely small; and there is nothing so small which does not permit of extension by our imagination to the greatness of the world compared with still smaller standards. Telescopes have furnished us with abundant material for making the first remark, microscopes for the second. Nothing, therefore, which can be an object of the senses is, considered on this basis, to be called sublime. But because there is in our imagination a striving toward infinite progress and in our reason a claim for *absolute totality, regarded as a real idea*, therefore the very inadequacy for that idea of our faculty for estimating the magnitude of things of sense, *excites in us the feeling of a supersensible faculty*. And it is not the object of

sense, but the use which the judgment naturally makes of certain objects on behalf of this latter feeling that is absolutely great, and in comparison every other use is small. Consequently it is the standard of mind produced by a certain representation with which the reflective judgment is occupied, and not the object that is to be called sublime.³²

Cusanus' *non aliud* is, in Kant's sense, an idea born of the collusion of imagination and reason. Kant distinguishes two operations of the imagination:

Par. 26. In receiving a quantum of the imagination by intuition, in order to be able to use it for a measure or as a unit for the estimation of a magnitude by means of numbers, there are two operations of the imagination involved: **apprehension** (*apprehensio*) and **comprehension** (comprehensio aesthetica). As to apprehension there is no difficulty, for it can go ad infinitum, but comprehension becomes harder the further apprehension advances, and soon attains to its maximum, viz. the greatest possible aesthetical fundamental measure for the estimation of magnitude. For when apprehension has gone so far that the partial representations of sensuous intuition at first apprehended begin to vanish in the imagination, while this ever proceeds to the apprehension of others, then it loses as much on the one side as it gains on the other: and in comprehension there is a maximum beyond which it cannot go.

The sublime figures the non aliud. The rhetoric of the maximum is a rhetoric of the sublime.

Chapter Eleven: Mathematics assists us very greatly in apprehending various divine [truths]

In this chapter Cusanus addresses his preference for mathematical symbols. To establish the need for symbols he refers us to *Romans* I, 20:

Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely his eternal power and deity, has been **clearly perceived** in the things that have been made.

and I Corinthians, 13, 12: For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.

³² Trans. J. H. Bernard

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. (61; 30)

"Clearly perceive" and "in a mirror and a symbolism," *in speculo et in aenigmate* — What sense can we make of this. What kind of mirror and what sort of symbolism? All things stand in a comparative relationship to form a universe.

But the fact that spiritual matters (which are unattainable by us in themselves) are investigated *symbolically* has its basis in what was said earlier. For all things have a certain comparative relation to one another ([a relation which is], nonetheless, hidden from us and incomprehensible to us), so that from out of all things there arises one universe and in [this] one maximum all things are this one. And although every image seems to be like its exemplar, nevertheless except for the Maximal Image (which is, in oneness of nature, the very thing which its Exemplar is) no image is so similar or equal to its exemplar that it cannot be infinitely more similar and equal. (These [doctrines] have already been made known from the preceding [remarks]). (61; 30)

The bond that holds creation together is the maximum in which they are all one. God we can say is experienced as the **theme** of the world. I use the word "theme" here, thinking of Aleaxander Gottlieb Baumgarten, the founder of aesthetics: Here his definition:

Par. $66.^{33}$ By **theme** we mean that whose representation contains the sufficient reason of other representations supplied in the discourse, but which does not have its own sufficient reason in them. (p. 62)

In creating a unity out of a manifold the poet is like another **god**, the work he creates like another world, having its own closure. The simile leads Baumgarten to make the following provocative claim:

Par. 68. We observed a little while ago that the poet is like a maker or creator. So the poem ought to be like a world. Hence by analogy

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³³ Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry (Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus*), tr. Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954.

whatever is evident to the philosophers concerning the real world, the same ought to be thought of a poem. (p. 63)

This is to say that whatever the philosophers have said about the world is by analogy true of the poem. Take Leibniz's *Monadology*, which represents the world as a perfectly ordered whole. The philosopher's discourse, to be sure, aims to be clear and distinct. Cusanus would say that our understanding of God will never be clear and distinct. In this sense it is more like Baumgarten's poetic undestanding. A poem cannot be translated into a clear and distinct discourse. But note what the simile suggests: the world presents itself to us humans as a poem that has God for its theme.

But Cusanus does not turn to poetry, he turns to mathematics:

Now, when we conduct an inquiry on the basis of an image, it is necessary that there be no doubt regarding the image, by means of whose symbolical comparative relation we are investigating what is unknown. For the pathway to the uncertain can be only through what is presupposed and certain. But all perceptible things are in a state of continual instability because of the material possibility abounding in them. In our considering of objects, we see that those which are more abstract than perceptible things, viz., mathematicals, (not that they are altogether free of material associations, without which they cannot be imagined, and not that they are at all subject to the possibility of changing) are very fixed and are very certain to us. Therefore, in mathematicals the wise wisely sought illustrations of things that were to be searched out by the intellect. (61; 31)

What kind of symbolism should be chosen? There should be no doubt concerning the image. Before we ask whether a model we are offered is a good model, we have to be clear about it. Just as we cannot decide the truth or falsity of a proposition unless we first understand its meaning, so we should be clear about the symbolism we are employing. That explains the superiority of mathematical symbols. By their relative freedom from material associations and their fixed character they are to be preferred. Note that every real circle can never be more than an approximation to the thought circle. And yet there are better and worse approximations. Cusanus delights in the incommensurability of measure and measured; but also in the incommensurability between geometrical figures such as circle and polygon. Once again, our attempt to express the circumference in terms

of the radius allows for better and whose approximations and in his mathematical writings Cusanus is intent to compete with those of his predecessors, such as Archimedes. Once again, **the comparative is what we ought to strive for, not the superlative**. But our inability to lay claim to the superlative in no way leads Cusanus to skepticism.

Cusanus gives some examples of thinkers who employed such symbolism and concludes that because of their incorruptible certainty mathematical signs are most suitable when exploring divine matters.

> Proceeding on this pathway of the ancients, I concur with them and say that since the pathway for approaching divine matters is opened to us only through symbols, we can make quite suitable use of mathematical signs because of their incorruptible certainty. (62; 32)

The superiority of the mathematical symbol is due to the fact that here the mind is concerned with its own creation. This doctrine is only hinted at in *De docta ignorantia*. But what is hinted at here becomes explicit in later writings: (see *Complementum Theologicum*³⁴). The mind is understood by Cusanus as an **unfolding unity**. It creates the measures it brings to things. Numbers provide the form of these measures. Number can be considered the principle of reason,³⁵ Their creation takes place within the mind. Note that the superiority of mathematical symbols also applies to the study of nature. Cusanus attempted to develop some of the implications of the latter in the little dialogue *Idiota de staticis experimentis*.

But how are mathematical symbols, which according to Cusanus are necessarily finite, to help us think the being of God?

3

Chapter Twelve: The way in which mathematical signs ought to be used in our undertaking

Obviously there will be no simple likeness:

³⁴ Cf. Maurice de Gandillac, *La philosophie de Nicolas de Cues* (Paris: Aubier, 1942). Thoroughly revised German edition: *Nikolaus von Cues. Studien zu seiner Philosophie und philosophischen Weltanschauung*, trans. Karl Fleischmann (Düsseldorf: Schwann, 1953), pp. 148-149.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 164.

But since from the preceding [points] it is evident that the unqualifiedly Maximum cannot be any of the things which we either know or conceive: when we set out to investigate the Maximum symbolically, we must leap beyond simple likeness. For since all mathematicals are finite and otherwise could not even be imagined: if we want to use finite things as a way for ascending to the unqualifiedly Maximum, we must first consider finite mathematical figures together with their characteristics and relations. (62; 33)

We must first consider the relationships that hold between finite mathematical figures. such as circle and inscribed polygon. Try to determine the angle formed by circle and the side of some inscribed polygon. Here, although concerned with finite figures, we find ourselves already involved with the infinite. **Such incommensurability comes to figure the lack of proportion between the infinite and the finite**.

> Next, [we must] apply these relations, in a transformed way, to corresponding infinite mathematical figures. Thirdly, [we must] thereafter in a still more highly transformed way, apply the relations of these infinite figures to the simple Infinite, which is altogether independent even of all figure. At this point our ignorance will be taught incomprehensibly how we are to think more correctly and truly about the Most High as we grope by means of a symbolism. (62-63; 33)

The chapter concludes again with examples that must have been familiar to his readers: Operating in this way, then, and beginning under the guidance of the maximum Truth, I affirm what the holy men and the most exalted intellects who applied themselves to figures have stated in various ways. The most devout Anselm compared the maximum Truth to infinite rectitude. (Let me, following him, have recourse to the figure of rectitude, which I picture as a straight line.) Others who are very talented compared, to the Super-blessed Trinity, a triangle consisting of three equal right angles. Since, necessarily, such a triangle has infinite sides, as will be shown, it can be called an infinite triangle. (These men I will also follow.) Others who have attempted to befigure infinite oneness have spoken of God as an infinite circle. But those who considered the most actual existence of God affirmed that He is an infinite sphere, as it were. I will show that all of these [men] have rightly conceived of the Maximum and that the opinion of them all is a single opinion. (63; 33)

Anselm: symbolized maximum truth by the straight line. The infinite triangle and circle Cusanus could find in Heimeric de Campo. The infinite sphere, a key metaphor for Cusanus, he found in Meister Eckhart, who in turn found it in the *Book of the XXIV Philosophers.* A question: Why should the infinite sphere be a particularly apt symbol for "the most actual existence of God," *actualissimam dei existentiam*? We shall return to the symbol of the infinite sphere in chapter twenty-three and again in the second book.

4

Chapter Thirteen: The characteristics of a maximum infinite line

Cusanus asserts that the infinite line, if there were such a line, would coincide with a straight line, a triangle, a circle, and a sphere. (63; 35)

That the circumference of the maximum circle in minimally curved and maximally straight is easily granted. The diagram (63: 35) speaks for itself. More puzzling is the proof offered for the claim that the infinite line is a maximum, triangle, circle, and square. Hopkins is right to call our attention **to the troubling shift from the subjunctive of the beginning, which denies that there is an actual line, to the indicative**. The infinite line is said to be all the finite line can be. Here one is tempted to accuse Cusanus of thought play. But the thought deserves more reflection.

Secondly, I said that an infinite line is a maximum triangle, a maximum circle, and a [maximum] sphere. In order to demonstrate this, we must in the case of finite lines see what is present in the potency of a finite line. And that which we are examining will become clearer to us on the basis of the fact that an infinite line is, actually, whatever is present in the potency of a finite line. (64; 36)

Not that the claim is too surprising. A hint is offered by the coincidence of the onedimensional line with the two-dimensional circle when its radius is stretched to infinity. But in its "proof" Cusanus invokes the idea of the **potency of a finite line**. Therefore, if these figures are present in the potency of a finite line and if an infinite line is actually all the things with respect to which a finite line is in potency, then it follows that an infinite line is a triangle, a circle, and a sphere. Q.E.D. (64; 36)

As Cusanus recognizes, the argument presented is not at all perspicuous, and the next chapter promises to address this difficulty.

5

Chapter Fourteen. An infinite line is a triangle

The discussion serves to clarify the **distinction between imagination and intellect**.

Since in the case of quantitative things a line and a triangle differ incomparably, the imagination, which does not transcend the genus of perceptible things, does not apprehend that the former can be the latter. However, this [apprehending] will be easy for the intellect. (64; 37)

To explain this Cusanus raises the height of an equilateral triangle to infinity. Furthermore, you can be helped to understand the foregoing if you ascend from a quantitative triangle to a non-quantitative triangle. Clearly, every quantitative triangle has three angles equal to two right angles. And so, the larger the one angle is, the smaller are the other two. Now, any one angle can be increased almost but (in accordance with our first premise) not completely up to the size of two right angles. Nevertheless, let us hypothesize that it is increased completely up to the size of two right angles while the triangle remains [nonetheless a triangle]. In that case, it will be obvious that the triangle has one angle which is three angles and that the three angles are one. (65; 38)

In this connection I would like to take a side glance at Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence. To think the infinite time line, i.e. to bound it, is to think it as coinciding with the circle. In this connection, think of Nietzsche's suggestion that the thought of the eternal recurrence represents the greatest "Annäherung des *Werdens an das Sein*," the approximation of *Werden* and *Sein*, of becoming and being.

6

Chapter Fifteen: The maximum triangle is a circle and a sphere.

The proof explains itself

Next, we shall see more clearly that a triangle is a circle. Let us postulate the triangle ABC, formed by rotating the line AB — A remaining stationary — until B comes to C. There is no doubt that if line AB were infinite and B were rotated until it came all the way back to the starting point, a maximum circle would be formed, of which BC would be a portion. Now, because BC is a portion of an infinite arc, BC is a straight line. And since every part of what is infinite is infinite, BC is not shorter than the whole arc of infinite circumference.

Hence, BC will be not only a portion but the most complete circumference. Therefore, it is necessary that the triangle ABC be a maximum circle. And because the circumference BC is a straight line, it is not greater than the infinite line AB; for there is nothing greater than what is infinite. Nor are there two lines, because there cannot be two infinite things. Therefore, the infinite line, which is a triangle, is also a circle. And [this is] what was proposed [for proof]. (66; 40)

Everything depends here on the claim that there are not different infinites, one greater than the other. Is that obvious?

7

Chapter Sixteen: In a symbolic way the Maximum is to all things as a maximum line is to all lines.

Now that we have seen how it is that an infinite line is actually and infinitely all that which is in the possibility of a finite line: we likewise have a symbolism for seeing how it is that, in the case of the simple Maximum, this Maximum is actually and maximally all that which is in the possibility of Absolute Simplicity. For whatever is possible, this the Maximum is actually and maximally. [I do] not [mean] that it is from what is possible but rather that it is [what-is-possible] maximally. By comparison, a triangle is educed from a line; but an infinite line, [though a triangle], is not a triangle as [a triangle] is educed from a finite [line]; rather, [the infinite line] is actually an infinite triangle, which is identical with the [infinite] line. Moreover, absolute possibility is, in the Maximum, not other than actually the Maximum — just as an infinite line is actually a sphere. The situation is otherwise in the case of what is non-maximum. For in that case the possibility is not the actuality — even as a finite line is not a triangle. (66-67: 42)

We should note the coincidence of possibility and actuality in the Maximum.

Hence, we notice here an important speculative consideration which, from the foregoing, can be inferred about the Maximum: viz., that the Maximum is such that in it the Minimum is the Maximum, and thus the Maximum infinitely and in every respect transcends all opposition. From this principle there can be elicited about the Maximum as many negative truths as can be written or read; indeed, all humanly apprehensible theology is elicited from this very great principle. (67: 43)

Cusanus here claims to be following Peudo-Dionysius:

Accordingly, the greatest seeker of God, Dionysius the Areopagite, declares in his *Mystical Theology* that most blessed Bartholomew marvelously understood theology, having called it the greatest and the least. For whoever understands this [point] understands all things; he transcends all created understanding. 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. For, as Dionysius concludes at the end of *The Mystical Theology*: "above all affirmation God is the perfect and unique Cause of all things; and the excellence of Him who is unqualifiedly free from all things and is beyond all things is above the negation of all things." Hence, he concludes in his *Letter to Gaius* that God is known above every mind and all intelligence. (67; 43)

The following reference to Moses Maimonides, called by Cusanus here Rabbi Solomon, is not based on a reading of the *Guide for the Perplexed*, but on quotations he had found

in Meister Eckhart's *Exodus* commentary.³⁶ That Cusanus does not hesitate to thus join the Rabbi to Pseudo-Dionysius is of some interest.

And in harmony with this [verdict] Rabbi Solomon states that all the wise agreed that the sciences do not apprehend the Creator. Only He Himself apprehends what He is; our apprehension of Him is a defective approximation of His apprehension. *[est defectus appropinquandi apprensioni eius* — our apprehension is not just defective, it is that very failure to apprehend him] Accordingly, Rabbi Solomon elsewhere says by way of conclusion: "Praised be the Creator! When His existence (*essentia*) [Why does Hopkins translate *essentia* as existence?] is apprehended, the inquiry of the sciences is cut short, wisdom is reckoned as ignorance, and elegance of words as fatuity." And this is that learned ignorance which we are investigating. Dionysius [himself] endeavored to show in many ways that God can be found only through learned ignorance—[found] by no other principle, it seems to me, than the aforesaid. (67; 44)

This understanding of God should be compared with the non aliud.

8

Chapter Seventeen: Very deep doctrines from the symbolism of an infinite line This chapter that leads to the very heart of Cusanus' thinking.

Still more on the same topic: A finite line is divisible, and an infinite line is indivisible; for the infinite, in which the maximum coincides with the minimum, has no parts. However, a finite line is not divisible to the point that it is no longer a line, because in the case of magnitude we do not arrive at a minimum than which there cannot be a lesser — as was indicated earlier. Hence, a finite line is indivisible in its essence [*ratio*]; a line of one foot is not less a line than is a line of one cubit. It follows, then, that an infinite line is the essence of a finite line. Similarly, the unqualifiedly Maximum is the Essence of all things. But the essence is the measure. Hence, Aristotle rightly says in the *Metaphysics* that the First is

³⁶ Herbert Wackerzapp, Der Einfluss Meister Eckharts auf die ersten philosophischen Schrtiften des Nikolaus von Kues, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie in der Theologie des Mittelalters XXXIX 3 (1962), p. 8.

the measure [*metrum et mensura*] of all things because it is the Essence of all things. (68: 47)

Cusanus calls the infinite line the essence of the finite line. The point should be evident. The thought invites being transferred to time. Could the essence of time then be said to be eternity. This invites an interpretation of the eternal recurrence.

We should note the move from essence to measure. Let me read you here the relevant Aristotle passage:

Metaphysics X , 1 1052b 14 - 21:... the name 'element' means that it has this attribute, that there is something which is made of it as a primary constituent. And so with 'cause' and 'one' and all such terms. For this reason to be one is to be indivisible (being essentially a 'this' and capable of existing apart either in place or in form or thought) or perhaps to be whole and indivisible; but it is especially to be the first measure of a kind, and above all of quantity; for it is from this that it has been extended to the other categories.

Cusanus infers from this eternity and immutability of God.

Furthermore: Just as an infinite line, which is the essence of a finite line, is indivisible and hence immutable and eternal, so also the Essence of all things, viz., Blessed God, is eternal and immutable. And herein is disclosed an understanding of the great Dionysius, who says that the Essence [*essentia*] of things is incorruptible, and of others who have said that the Essence [*ratio*] of things is eternal. (69; 48)

By now this passage should no longer pose much difficulty. (Once more, cf. Nietzsche.) Interesting is the following passage where Cusanus gives us his own views on Plato's theory of forms:

For example, [let me mention] the divine Plato, who, as Chalcidius reports, stated in the *Phaedo* that, as it exists in itself, there is one Form or Idea of all things but [that] with respect to things, which are plural, there seems to be a plurality of forms. For example, when I consider a two-foot line, a three-foot line, and so on, two things appear: (1) the line's essence, which is one and equal in each and every line and (2) the difference which there is between a line of two feet and a line of three feet. And so, the
essence of a two-foot line and the essence of a three-foot line seem to be different. However, it is obvious that in an infinite line a line of two feet and a line of three feet do not differ. Now, an infinite line is the essence of a finite line. Hence, there is one essence of both lines; and the difference between the things, or the lines, does not result from a difference of the essence, which is one, but results accidentally, because the lines do not participate equally in the essence. Hence, there is only one essence of all lines, and it is participated in different ways. (69; 48)

This suggests that there is really only one form, God. The seeming multiplicity of forms is accidental.

The reference to the *Phaedo* is confused. The text referred to by Chalcidius was a commentary on the *Timaeus*.

But as for there being differences of participation: this occurs because (as we proved earlier, there cannot be two things which are exactly similar and which, consequently, participate precisely and equally in one essence. For only the Maximum, which is Infinite Essence, can participate with supreme equality in essence. Just as there is only one Maximum Oneness, so there can be only one Equality of Oneness. Because it is Maximum Equality, it is the Essence of all things. (69; 49)

Cusanus, too, here understands Plato's forms as the Divine Logos.

Moreover, in a line of two feet an infinite line is neither longer nor shorter than the two-foot line, as was stated earlier. And similarly regarding lines of three feet and more. Now, since an infinite line is indivisible and one, it is present as a whole in each finite line. But it is not present as a whole in each finite line according to participation and limitation; otherwise, when it was present as a whole in a line of two feet, it could not be present in a line of three feet, since a line of two feet is not a line of three feet. Therefore, it is present as a whole in each line in such way that it is not present in any line insofar as one line is distinct from the others through limitation. Therefore, the infinite line is present as a whole in each line in such way that each line is present in it. Now, this [point] must be considered in both its aspects; for then we will see clearly how it is that the Maximum is in each thing and in no thing. This [symbolism of a line] symbolizes none other than the Maximum, since by similar reasoning the Maximum is [seen to be] in each thing, even as each thing [is seen to be] in it; moreover, [this symbolism] displays the reason that the Maximum exists in itself. Accordingly, the fact that the Maximum is the measure [*metrum et mensura*] of all things is not other than the fact that the unqualifiedly Maximum exists in itself — i.e., that the Maximum is the Maximum. Therefore, no thing exists in itself except the Maximum; and everything exists in itself insofar as it exists in its Essence [*ratio*], because its Essence (*ratio*) is the Maximum. (69-70; 50)

The Maximum presents itself to our understanding as no thing, as nothing

9

Chapter Eighteen: From the same symbolism we are led to an understanding of participation in being

The being of a curve is said to derive from straightness. That thought by now should pose no problem:

Furthermore, our insatiable intellect, stimulated by the aforesaid, carefully and with very great delight inquires into how it can behold more clearly this participation in the one Maximum. And being once again aided by the illustration of an infinite straight line, it remarks: A curve, which admits of more or less, cannot be a maximum or a minimum. Nor is a curve, qua curve, anything — since it is a deficiency of what is straight. Therefore, the being which is in a curve derives from participation in straightness, since a curve, considered maximally and minimally, is only something straight. Therefore, the less a curve is a curve (e.g., the circumference of a quite large circle), the more it participates in straightness. [I do] not [mean] that it takes a part of it, because infinite straightness is not partible. Now, the longer a straight finite line is, the more it seems to participate in the infinity of an infinite, maximum line. (70-71; 52) Cusanus next tries to show how there can be degrees of participation in the maximum. Again he relies on the example of the curve. A straight line participates in the infinite line more obviously than a curved line. Analogously substance participates more in the Maximum than accidents. This leads to an attempt to fit Aristotle's substance-accident ontology into his scheme:

> Moreover, through this [illustration] we see how it is that there can be only beings which participate in the being of the First either through themselves or through other than themselves — just as there are only lines, either straight or curved. Wherefore, Aristotle was right in dividing all the things in the world into substance and accident. (71; 53)

But neither "substance" nor "accident" applies to God. For this reason Dionysius is said to have been right when he called God super-substantial rather than super-accidental. But, as he reminds us, Cusanus makes no attempt to develop the ontology of substance and accident further.

6. Naming God

1

Today I would like to finish our discussion of Book One. Last time we spoke of Cusanus' use of mathematical symbols. Cusanus is especially interested in how they can assist the theologian. But of how much help are they? Cusanus calls them paradigms (*paradigmata*), which Hopkins translates as symbols, Paul Wilpert as *Beispiele*, examples. What is a paradigm? Does Kant's understanding of symbolic hypotyposis in the *Critique of Judgment* help here? Kant there compares a despotic state to a handmill? There is an analogy in the way we think about both. That seems to fit Cusanus' use of his *paradigmata*?

A further question which we shall not have time to explore here: How is Cusanus' use of *paradigmata* related to medieval analogy?

A Cusan paradigm, at any rate, is provided by the infinite triangle: such a triangle exists no more than a square circle; it is an idea of reason that stretches it to a point where it founders on the reef of the infinite. This is how we must think about God.

2

Chapter Nineteen: The Likening of an Infinite Triangle to Maximum Trinity

Regarding what was stated and shown, viz., that a maximum line is a maximum triangle: let us now become instructed in ignorance. We have seen that a maximum line is an [infinite] triangle; and because [this] line is most simple, it will be something most simple and three. Every angle of the triangle will be the line, since the triangle as a whole is the line. Hence, the infinite line is three. But there cannot be more than one infinite thing. Therefore, this trinity is oneness. (72; 55)

True enough: given this kind of reasoning trinity is indeed oneness, but can the same not be said about any other figure, e.g. a square or a pentagon? But do they furnish equally perspicuous paradigms? To be sure, the triangle is not uniquely privileged. As Cusanus himself admits: Furthermore, a maximum line is just as much a triangle, a circle, and a sphere as it is a line; it is truly and incompositely all these, as was shown. (72; 55)

The argument would indeed seem to work for any finite figure, although Cusanus privileges the triangle, circle, and sphere. Why then should these three be privileged? It is this topic that is tackled in the next chapter.

Chapter Twenty: Still more regarding the Trinity. There cannot be fourness (fiveness) etc. in God

However, you might like to note, regarding this ever-blessed Trinity, that the Maximum is three and not four or five or more. This point is surely noteworthy. For [fourness or fiveness, etc.] would be inconsistent with the simplicity and the perfection of the Maximum. (74; 60)

The argument invokes the idea of the simplest element. The triangle is said to be the *principium* of all figures as one is the *principium* of all numbers.

For example, every polygonal figure has a triangular figure as its simplest element; moreover, a triangular figure is the minimal polygonal figure — than which there cannot be a smaller figure. Now, we proved that the unqualifiedly minimum coincides with the maximum. Therefore, just as one is to numbers, so a triangle is to polygonal figures. Therefore, just as every number is reducible to oneness, so [all] polygons are [reducible] to a triangle (74; 60)

How convincing do you find this reasoning?

For [a quadrangle] could not be a congruent measure of triangular figures, because it would always exceed them. Hence, how could that which would not be the measure of all things be the maximum? Indeed, how could that which would derive from another and would be composite, and hence finite, be the maximum? (74; 60)

Just as the number 1 is privileged among numbers, the triangle is privileged among rectilinear figures. As one is an unfolding of 1, all rectilinear figures are an unfolding of the triangle.

Important in this connection is the idea of **measure**.

It is now evident why from the potency of a simple line there first arises a simple triangle (as regards polygons), then a simple circle, and then a simple sphere; and we do not arrive at other than these elemental figures which are disproportional to one another in finite things and which enfold within themselves all figures. Hence, if we wanted to conceive of the measures of all measurable quantities: first we would have to have, for length, a maximum, infinite line, with which the minimum would coincide; then, similarly, for rectilinear size [we would have to have] a maximum triangle; and for circular size, a maximum circle; and for depth, a maximum sphere; and with other than these four we could not attain to all measurable things. (74-75; 61)

It is difficult to take these analogies too seriously. Cusanus has in mind the preceding discussion, which generated triangle, circle, and sphere out of the line. Important here is the need to recognize the generative power of the Maximum. God must be thought of as creator and that means in relation to creation. God must be thought of as the Word that unfolds all that is possible and that Word must become flesh, i.e. must become actualized in creation.

This trinitarian structure is rediscovered in activities, thoughts, volitions, likenesses, etc.

And so, we regard the maximum triangle as the simplest measure of all trinely existing things — even as activities are actions existing trinely (1) in potency, (2) in regard to an object, and (3) in actuality. The case is similar regarding perceptions, thoughts, volitions, likenesses, unlikenesses, adornments, comparative relations, mutual relations, natural appetites, and all other things whose oneness of being consists of plurality — e.g., especially a nature's being and activity, which consist of a mutual relationship between what acts, what is acted upon, and what derives commonly from these two. (75; 62)

Note that this suggests that this is the only world God could have created. Not that there is a sufficient reason we can give why the world is as it is. For the finite understanding

what is offers itself as an island in the ocean of what could be. But in God possibility and actuality are one.

Chapter Twenty-one: The likening of the infinite circle to oneness

Therefore, [by comparison]: since the Maximum is of infinite oneness, all the things which befit it are it, without difference and otherness. Thus, its goodness is not different from its wisdom but is the same thing; for in the Maximum all difference is identity. Hence, since the Maximum's power is most one, its power is also most powerful and most infinite. The Maximum's most one duration is so great that in its duration the past is not other than the future, and the future is not other than the present; rather, they are the most one duration, or eternity, without beginning and end. For in the Maximum the beginning is so great that even the end is — in the Maximum — the beginning. (75-76; 63)

Note once again how close Cusanus here comes to the doctrine of the eternal recurrence. In God the end is that beginning. Just as actuality and possibility coincide in God, so do past and future. The time line can thus be thought as an infinite circle, which offers itself as a fitting expression of God's being.

> All these [points] are exhibited by the infinite circle, which is eternal, without beginning and end, indivisibly the most one and the most encompassing. Because this circle is maximum, its diameter is also maximum. And since there cannot be more than one maximum, this circle is most one to such an extent that the diameter is the circumference. Now, an infinite diameter has an infinite middle. But the middle is the center. Therefore, it is evident that the center, the diameter, and the circumference are the same thing. (76; 64)

Cusanus offers these mathematical examples or symbolisms (*paradigmata*) to illuminate the relationship of God to creation:

Accordingly, our ignorance is taught that the Maximum, to which the Minimum is not opposed, is incomprehensible. But in the Maximum the center is the circumference. You see that because the center is infinite, the whole of the Maximum is present most perfectly within everything as the

Simple and the Indivisible; moreover, it is outside of every being surrounding all things, because the circumference is infinite, and penetrating all things, because the diameter is infinite. It is the Beginning of all things, because it is the center; it is the End of all things, because it is the circumference; it is the Middle of all things, because it is the diameter. It is the efficient Cause, since it is the center; it is the formal Cause, since it is the diameter; it is the final Cause, since it is the circumference. It bestows being, for it is the center; it regulates being, for it is the diameter; it conserves being, for it is the circumference. And many similar such things. (76: 64)

Cusanus continues by reiterating that in the infinite circle center, diameter, and circumference are one and the same. Of interest is the comment on the circular character of all theology.

I call attention only to the following: that all theology is circular and is based upon a circle. [This is true] to such an extent that the names for the [divine] attributes are predicated truly of one another in a circular manner. For example, supreme justice is supreme truth, and supreme truth is supreme justice; and similarly for all the others. Accordingly, if you want to prolong the inquiry, an infinite number of theological [points] which are now hidden from you can be made very obvious to you. (76-77; 66)

What are the consequences of this circularity, which is here sort of tossed off? Can there be a proof in theology? The very idea of proof would appear to betray ignorance. Could the product of such a proof ever be God? Theology would seem to demand that we enter this theological circle. Small wonder that Wenck found such reasoning unreasonable.

3

Twenty-two: How God's foresight unites contradictories

With this we return to the problem of time and, intertwined with it, to the problem of freedom:

But so that we may also come to see how through the previous points we are led to a deep understanding, let us direct our inquiry to [the topic of]

God's foresight. Since it is evident from the foregoing that God is the enfolding of all things, even of contradictories, [it is also evident that] nothing can escape His foresight. For whether we do some thing or its opposite or nothing, the whole of it was enfolded in God's foresight. Therefore, nothing will occur except in accordance with God's foreseeing. (77; 67)

Whatever we choose to do cannot escape God's foresight. God will have foreseen what we chose to do. Take Aristotle's statement about the seafight that either will or will not take place tomorrow. The law of the excluded middle in such cases does not seem to hold: if I hold that to be meaningful a statement must be either true or false, statements about future contingencies, such as "the seafight will take place tomorrow" are not really meaningful. But if God foresees all that will happen, must we not say that the proposition that it will take place tomorrow is now either true or false? And does the principle of bivalence, that every meaningful proposition is either true or false, not demand this? To be sure, we may not know what will happen, but God knows. Determinism would seem to follow. But Cusanus would not claim that we have a knowledge of divine foreknowledge that allows us to claim this. Whatever will happen is indeed, he claims, enfolded in God's foresight. But in God possibility and actuality coincide and this coincidence surpasses our understanding.

The following discussion is puzzling:

Hence, although God could have foreseen many things which He did not foresee and will not foresee and although He foresaw many things which He was able not to foresee, nevertheless nothing can be added to or subtracted from divine foresight. By way of comparison: Human nature is simple and one; if a human being were born who was never even expected to be born, nothing would be added to human nature. Similarly, nothing would be subtracted from human nature if [the human being] were not born — just as nothing [is subtracted] when those who have been born die. This [holds true] because human nature enfolds not only those who exist but also those who do not exist and will not exist, although they could have existed. In like manner, even if what will never occur were to occur, nothing would be added to divine foresight, since it enfolds not only what does occur but also what does not occur but can occur. Therefore, just as in matter many things which will never occur are present as possibilities so, by contrast, whatever things will not occur but can occur: although they are present in God's foresight, they are present not possibly but actually. Nor does it follow here from that these things exist actually. (77; 68)

The comparison of God's relationship to what has been, is, and will be the case to humanity's relationship to whatever human beings were, are or will be, invites an understanding of God as the Being of whatever is or can be. Such a God may not be thought as a being. Something like Heidegger's *ontologische Differenz* seems to open up here. *Gottheit* (Godhead) would thus be a better term than *Gott*. Eckhart liked the former term to speak of the God beyond God. The difference between *Gottheit* and *Gott* invites an understanding of *Gottheit* that, as I just suggested, would approach Heidegger's understanding of Being, where Heidegger was well aware of his proximity to Meister Eckhart. But such an understanding fails to capture what orthodoxy would have to insist on: that God be understood as the creator, as the author of the law, as the savior who took away the sting of death.

What bearing does this discussion have on the problem of freedom and divine providence? Does the coincidence of opposites provide the answer to this problem?

Hence, divine foresight is inescapable and immutable. Nothing can transcend it. Hence, all things related to it are said to have necessity — and rightly so, since in God all things are God, who is Absolute Necessity. And so, it is evident that the things which will never occur are present in God's foresight in the aforesaid manner, even if they are not foreseen to occur. It is necessary that God foresaw what He foresaw, because His foresight is necessary and immutable, even though He was able to foresee even the opposite of that which He did foresee. For if enfolding is posited (*posita complicatione*), it is not the case that the thing which was enfolded (*res complicata*) is posited; but if unfolding is posited. For example, although I am able to read or not to read tomorrow: no matter which of these I shall do, I will not escape [God's] foresight, which embraces [i.e.,

enfolds] (*complectitur*) contraries. Hence, whatever I shall do will occur in accordance with God's foresight. (78; 69)

God enfolds contraries. All that is actual and all that is possible is folded together or enfolded in God, but God unfolds himself only in what is actual. But just as humanity is constitutive of every possible human being, it is realized only in those that were, are, or will actually exist. But to think of God in human fashion as first foreseeing these different possibilities and then willing some of these to exist, perhaps because they would make this the best of all possible worlds, would be to violate the unity of God.

In this connection Kant's Third Antinomy is of some interest. The thesis claims that the causality which science presupposes is insufficient to explain everything that happens in the world. Everything is not so determined. We also need to have recourse to explanations that recognize freedom, that recognize that it makes sense to speak of a genuine origin, be it the origin of the cosmos, be it a free decision. The antithesis insists that everything that happens in the world is indeed ruled by the laws that govern nature, that there is no freedom. The thesis counters that such causal explanations leads to an infinite regress, that there has to be something such as absolute spontaneity, that is to say another sort of groundless causality. The antithesis replies that such a causality is unthinkable, and once again it does not matter whether we are thinking of human or divine freedom. Returning to Cusanus' example, we could say that the thesis has its counterpart in the view that I am free to decide whether I shall read or not read tomorrow. The antithesis will insist that whatever I shall be doing is determined by God's foresight and is this determined. The solution lies in recognizing that God is beyond the principle of non-contradiction.

3

Chapter Twenty-three: The likening of the infinite sphere to the actual existence of God

This is basically a restatement of what was said about the infinite circle. The figure of the infinite sphere will play a central part in the cosmology of Cusanus.

It is fitting to reflect upon still a few more points regarding an infinite sphere. In an infinite sphere we find that three maximum lines — of length, width, and depth — meet in a center. But the center of a maximum

sphere is equal to the diameter and to the circumference. Therefore, in an infinite sphere the center is equal to these three lines; indeed, the center is all three: viz., the length, the width, and the depth. And so, [by comparison], the Maximum will be — infinitely and most simply — all length, width, and depth; in the Maximum these are the one most simple, indivisible Maximum. As a center, the Maximum precedes all width, length, and depth; it is the End and the Middle of all these; for in an infinite sphere the center, the diameter, and the circumference are the same thing. (78; 70)

The importance it will have in Book II is hinted at by the following:

Since the Maximum is like a maximum sphere, we now see clearly that it is the one most simple and most congruent measure of the whole universe and of all existing things in the universe; for in it the whole is not greater than the part, just as an infinite sphere is not greater than an infinite line. Therefore, God is the one most simple Essence (ratio) of the whole world, or universe. (79; 72)

4

Chapter Twenty-four: The name of God; affirmative theology

Cusanus begins by observing that no name can properly befit the maximum. Names are bestowed for distinguishing among things. Oneness is thus not an adequate name for God. Better is oneness that cannot be opposed to otherness.

> However, it is not the case that "Oneness" is the name of God in the way in which we either name or understand oneness; for just as God transcends all understanding, so, a fortiori, [He transcends] every name. Indeed, through a movement of reason, which is much lower than the intellect names are bestowed for distinguishing between things. But since reason cannot leap beyond contradictories: as regards the movement of reason, there is not a name to which another [name] is not opposed. Therefore, as regards the movement of reason: plurality or multiplicity is opposed to oneness. Hence, not "oneness" but "Oneness to which neither otherness nor plurality nor multiplicity is opposed" befits God. (80; 76)

Here we are very close to the "name" *non aliud*. Still there is no adequate name, although some are more adequate than others.

Although "Oneness" seems to be a quite close name for the Maximum, nevertheless it is still infinitely distant from the true Name of the Maximum—[a Name] which is the Maximum. (80; 77)

A fully adequate name would have to be nothing other than the thing named. That holds for all names. All are inadequate. They are especially inadequate when we attempt to speak of God. Affirmative names befit God only "infinitesimally." (81; 78)

The question is: what allows them to befit him at all? All names are bestowed on God in relation to our understanding of created things. But between the finite and the infinite there is no proportion, we were told.

The aforesaid is so true of all affirmations that even the names of the Trinity and of the persons - viz., "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit" - are bestowed on God in relation to created things. For because God is Oneness, He is Begetter and Father; because He is Equality of Oneness, He is Begotten, or Son; because He is Union of both [Oneness and Equality-of-Oneness], He is Holy Spirit. Accordingly, it is clear that the Son is called Son because He is Equality of Oneness, or of Being, or of existing. Hence, from the fact that God was eternally able to create things — even had He not created them — it is evident [that] He is called Son in relation to these things. For He is Son because He is Equality of being [these] things; things could not exist beyond or short of Equality. Thus, He is Son because He is Equality of being of the things which God was able to make, even had He not been going to make them. Were God not able to make these things. He would not be Father. Son. or Holv Spirit: indeed. He would not be God. Therefore, if you reflect quite carefully, [you will see that] for the Father to beget the Son was [for Him] to create all things in the Word. Wherefore, Augustine maintains that the Word is both the Art and the Idea in relation to created things. Hence, God is Father because He begets Equality of Oneness; but He is Holy Spirit because He is the Love common to both [Oneness and Equality of Oneness]; and He is all these in relation to created things. (81-82; 80-81)

To think God as Trinity is still to think him in relation to creation.

Chapter Twenty-five: the pagans named God in various ways in relation to created things.

Of interest is what Cusanus has to say about he pagan Gods: in their different ways they all sought to capture something essential about God, but the pagans were too focused on the things of the world to recognize His transcendent unity. Thus they fell into idolatry, mistaking unfolded things fir the divine reality, although, Cusanus remarks, the wise continued rightly to believe in the oneness of God, as will be known to anyone who carefully examines Cicero *On the Nature of the Gods*, as well as the ancient philosophers. (83; 84)

Interesting is the way Cusanus dwells on the last God he mentions in the first paragraph: on Cupid:

[They named God] Cupid because of the unity of the two sexes (for which reason they also called Him Nature, since through the two sexes He conserves the species of things). Hermes said that not only all [species of] animals but also all [species of] non-animals have two sexes; wherefore, he maintained that the Cause of all things, viz., God, enfolds within Himself both the masculine and the feminine sex, of which he believed Cupid and Venus to be the unfolding. Valerius, too, the Roman, making the same affirmation, professed that Jupiter is the omnipotent Divine Father and Mother. Hence, in accordance with one thing's desiring (*cupit*) another, they gave to the daughter of Venus, i.e., of natural beauty, the name "Cupid." But they said that Venus is the daughter of omnipotent Jupiter. from whom Nature and all its accompaniments derive. (82-83: 83)

Worth noting are the shifting significations of Cupid. "Cupid" first appears as a name for the cause of all things, we might say as *natura naturans*, which through the two sexes "conserves the species of things." Thus Cupid appears here as male and female and as the bond that holds both together. Hermes Trismegistus is said to have understood Cupid as the result of the unfolding of God in whom the difference between masculine and feminine is enfolded. Here Cupid appears so to speak as the Son of God. Valerius gives us yet a third understanding: Cupid is now said to be the daughter of Venus, who in turn

is said to be the daughter of Jupiter. Venus is here identified with natural beauty and beauty gives rise to desire, which embracing beauty seeks to give birth. Once Again Cupid appears as one and there. And once again Plato's *Symposium* comes to mind and its account of eros.

How do you understand: "All these names are unfoldings of the enfolding of the one ineffable name" (84)? *Quae quidem omnia nomina unius ineffabilis nominis complicationem sunt explicantia*. The plenitude enfolded in God's ineffable name is unfolded in the potentially countless names that we human beings have given Him. The pagans attempted to unfold the essence of God in their gods, where, as we should expect, Cusanus senses anticipations of the Trinity.

To the pagans with their many gods are opposed the Jews, who worshipped one infinite God. And yet, fundamentally the pagans are said to have worshipped that same God, even if at times they fell into idolatry. Cicero's *De deorum natura*, as I mentioned, is cited in support. Idolatry is worshipping God in created things. In an extended sense one could say that idolatry is holding up any finite thing as the absolute. This brings to mind Hermann Broch's understanding of radical evil or of Kitsch.³⁷ Without learned ignorance it would seem that Christianity easily falls into something very much like idolatry. Think of the golden calf. Dogmatism and idolatry are related.

5

With this we come to the final chapter of Book One:

Chapter twenty-six: negative theology

The chapter begins with a reaffirmation of affirmative theology.

The worshipping of God, who is to be worshiped in spirit and in truth, must be based upon affirmations about Him. Accordingly, every religion, in its worshipping, must mount upward by means of affirmative theology. [Through affirmative theology] it worships God as one and three, as most wise and most gracious, as Inaccessible Light, as Life, Truth, and so on. And it always directs its worship by faith, which it attains more truly through learned ignorance. It believes that He whom it worships as one is All-in-one, and that He whom it worships as Inaccessible Light is not light as is corporeal light, to which darkness is opposed, but is infinite and most simple Light, in which darkness is Infinite Light; and [it believes] that Infinite Light always shines within the darkness of our ignorance but [that] the darkness cannot comprehend it. And so, the theology of negation is so necessary for the theology of affirmation that without it God would not be worshiped as the Infinite God but, rather, as a creature. And such worship is idolatry; it ascribes to the image that which befits only the reality itself. Hence, it will be useful to set down a few more things about negative theology. (84; 86)

Negative theology is necessary to save affirmative theology from idolatry. But by itself it leaves us only with the infinity of God, which is placed in no relation to creation. So understood, God is the radically other.

Hence in accordance with this negative theology, according to which [God] is only infinite, He is neither Father, Nor Son, nor Holy Spirit. (84:87)

No room is left for the Trinity. As soon as the persons of the Trinity are distinguished we have left negative theology behind, and we have to leave it behind if we are to make any sense of creation as creation, of God as creator. Cusanus now invokes Hilary of Poitiers.

Therefore, when Hilary of Poitiers distinguished the persons, he most astutely used the expressions "Infinity in the Eternal", "Beauty in the Image," and "Value in the Gift." He means that although in eternity we can see only infinity, nevertheless since the infinitywhich *is* eternity is negative infinity, it cannot be understood as Begetter but [can] rightly [be understood] as eternity, since "eternity" is affirmative of oneness, or maximum presence. Hence, [Infinity-in-the-Eternal is] the Beginning without beginning, "Beauty in the Image indicates the Beginning from the Beginning, "Value in the Gift" indicates the Procession of the two." (84; 87)

³⁷ See Karsten Harries, "Decoration, Death, and Devil," *Hermann Broch. Literature, Philosophy, Politics. The Yale Broch Symposium 1986* (Columbia, S. C.: Camden House, 1988), pp. 279-297.

Recall what Cusanus had said earlier about the proceession of Cupid from Venus, of Venus from Jupiter. To be sure, all such affirmations are highly inadequate. But the corresponding negations while true, are altogether insufficient, and so Cusanus concludes:

From these [observations] it is clear (1) that in theological matters negations are true and affirmations are inadequate, and (2) that, nonetheless, the negations which remove the more imperfect things from the most Perfect are truer than the others. For example, it is truer that God is not stone than that He is not life or intelligence; and [it is truer that He] is not drunkenness than that He is not virtue. The contrary [holds] for affirmations; for the affirmation which states that God is intelligence and life is truer than [the affirmation that He is] earth or stone or body. All these [points] are very clear from the foregoing. Therefrom we conclude that the precise truth shines incomprehensibly within the darkness of our ignorance. This is the learned ignorance we have been seeking and through which alone, as I explained, [we] can approach the maximum, triune God of infinite goodness — [approach Him] according to the degree of our instruction in ignorance, so that with all our might we may ever praise Him, who is forever blessed above all things, for manifesting to us His incomprehensible self. (85; 89)

7. The Shape of the Universe

1

The second book begins with a brief Prologue, once again addressed to Cardinal Julian Cesarini, which reminds us of what has been discussed in the first book concerning the Absolute Maximum from which every created thing derives and claims that if that maximum remains unknown, there will also be no precise truth concerning the things of this world.

2

Chapter One: Corollaries preliminary to inferring one infinite universe

The title already raises a question: if whatever is not the Absolute Maximum is finite, that Maximum alone would seem to deserve to be called infinite. How then can Cusanus now apply the term to the universe? In what sense can it be said to be infinite? In what sense finite?

Cusanus begins by reminding us of the thesis that outside the Absolute Maximum there can be no equality. Creation is the realm of the more and the less, where there is never an equality of measure and measured.

> I maintained, at the outset of my remarks, that with regard to things which are comparatively greater and lesser we do not come to a maximum in being and in possibility. Hence, in my earlier [remarks] I indicated that precise equality befits only God. Wherefore, it follows that, except for God, all positable things differ. Therefore, one motion cannot be equal to another; nor can one motion be the measure of another, since, necessarily, the measure and the thing measured differ. (87; 91)

From this he infers that there can be no precise calculation of the orbits of the planets:

Although these points will be of use to you regarding an infinite number of things, nevertheless if you transfer them to astronomy, you will recognize that the art of calculating lacks precision, since it presupposes that the motion of all the other planets can be measured by reference to the motion of the sun. Even the ordering of the heavens — with respect to whatever kind of place or with respect to the risings and settings of the

constellations or to the elevation of a pole and to things having to do with these — is not precisely knowable. And since no two places agree precisely in time and setting, it is evident that judgments about the stars are, in their specificity, far from precise. (87-88; 91)

What Cusanus has to say about astronomy here would seem to agree with then prevailing views. Had not Aristotle admitted that the astronomer had to settle for less than absolute truth, suggesting that the number of spheres necessary to explain the phenomena could reasonably be assumed to be 49 or perhaps 55? "The assertion of necessity, must be left to more powerful thinkers."³⁸ And Ptolemy had been forced to grant that the order of the spheres of sun, moon, and the five planets could not be definitively established and that his all too often ad hoc constructions of the motions of the planets could be reasonably challenged by other hypotheses?³⁹ In the same spirit Thomas Aquinas had pointed out that constructions using eccentrics and epicycles were not sufficient to establish truth, since other explanations are also able to save the phenomena.⁴⁰ Supported by such authorities, the Middle Ages were pretty much convinced that astronomers had to settle for less than the truth, had to be content to save the phenomena, a phrase that goes back to Plato.⁴¹ So what Cusanus here has to say did not go against the consensus of the learned.

Cusanus goes on to insist that while it is possible in geometry to prove one area equal to another, actually such equality is impossible.

If you subsequently adapt this rule to mathematics, you will see that equality is actually impossible with regard to geometrical figures and that no thing can precisely agree with another either in shape or in size. And although there are true rules for describing the equal of a given figure as it exists in its definition, nonetheless equality between different things is actually impossible. (88; 92)

But that we human beings are capable of thinking equality as is presupposed when we judge things unequal testifies to the way human reason transcends the material world.

³⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII, 8, 1074a10-17. Trans. W. D. Ross.

³⁹ *Ptolemy's Almagest*, trans. and annotated by G. J. Tomer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), XI, 1 and 2, pp. 419-423.

⁴⁰ Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, II, 32, art 1ad2, *Commentaria in libr. Arist. de caelo et mundo*, XII, 17.

A certain immensely pleasant contemplation could here be engaged in not only regarding the immortality of our intellectual, rational spirit (which harbors in its nature incorruptible reason, through which the mind attains, of itself, to the concordant and the discordant likeness in musical things), but also regarding the eternal joy into which the blessed are conducted, once they are freed from the things of this world. But [I will deal] with this [topic] elsewhere. (93)

Cusanus goes on to suggest that there is no perfect harmony. Nor is there absolute equality. All individuals are distinct. And yet our intellect bears within itself the idea of equality. And this provides us with the regulative ideal of truth.

No one [human being] is as another in any respect — neither in sensibility, nor imagination, nor intellect, nor in an activity (whether writing or painting or an art). Even if for a thousand years one [individual] strove to imitate another in any given respect, he would never attain precision (though perceptible difference sometimes remains unperceived). Even art imitates nature as best it can; but it can never arrive at reproducing it precisely. Therefore, medicine as well as alchemy, magic, and other transmutational arts, lacks true precision, although one art is truer in comparison with another (e.g., medicine is truer than the transmutational arts, as is self-evident). (89; 94)

Here we should raise the question: in just what respect is medicine truer than the transmutational arts? What makes one imitation superior to the other? The measure would seem to be provided by what we perceive. Differences between the imitation and the imitated can become so small that they are imperceptible.

The material world is the realm of the more or less. But from the finite there is no transition to the infinite: no matter how long I count, I will never get to the maximum number: the infinite number. In that sense the universe is in its essence finite: but counting I never come to an end. No matter how large a number, I can always add +1. In this sense the number sequence is endless and thus infinite. And just as I will never arrive at a largest number by adding number to number, so I will never be able to conceive the universe as a whole, i.e. as a universe.

⁴¹ Plato, *Timaeus*, 29b-d

This leads to a distinction between the negatively and the privatively infinite. The universe is infinite in the latter sense in that it has no boundaries; there is nothing beyond it. But God is infinite in a different sense:

Therefore, only the absolutely Maximum is negatively infinite. Hence, it alone is whatever there can at all possibly be. But since the universe encompasses all the things which are not God, it cannot be negatively infinite, although it is unbounded and thus privatively infinite. And in this respect it is neither finite nor infinite. For it cannot be greater than it is. (90; 97)

The universe, thought as a the totality of what is, cannot be thought greater than it is, because then we would have to think a possible beyond, but this we cannot do. In this sense we cannot comprehend the world's finitude. We cannot understand the universe as finite.

This results from a defect. For its possibility, or matter, does not extend itself farther. For to say "The universe can always be actually greater" is not other than saying "Possible being passes over into actually infinite being." But this latter [statement] cannot hold true, since infinite actuality — which is absolute eternity, which is actually all possibility of being cannot arise from possibility. Therefore, although with respect to God's infinite power, which is unlimitable, the universe could have been greater: nevertheless, since the possibility-of-being, or matter, which is not actually extendible unto infinity, opposes, the universe cannot be greater. And so, [the universe is] unbounded; for it is not the case that anything actually greater than it, in relation to which it would be bounded is positable. (97)

There is a sense in which the universe, then, too, is *infinitum* and *maximum*. But since it is finite all the same, the universe must exist in a contracted manner: it is the *maximum contractum*. But what is the meaning of this *contractio*?

Contractio makes something definite, a this. Thus it is related to definition, to the word. But a specific this stands in a relation to others. The universe is a contracted maximum in that it is a plurality of different things. It stands in somewhat the same

relationship to God as the idea of finite number, which is also the idea of all finite numbers, to the maximum number or a universal.

Chapter Two: Created being derives from the being of the First in a way that is not understandable.

This point, reiterated in the *Apology*, suggests the essential impossibility of arriving at a clear understanding of the relationship of creator and creation. The following discussion could be cited as an illustration of this point. Not surprisingly, Cusanus suggests that no privation can be due to the Maximum.

Sacred ignorance has already taught us that nothing exists from itself except the unqualifiedly Maximum (in which from itself, in itself, through itself, and with respect to itself are the same thing: viz., Absolute Being) and that, necessarily, every existing thing is that which it is, insofar as it is, from Absolute Being. For how could that which is not from itself exist in any other way than from Eternal Being? But since the Maximum is far distant from any envy, it cannot impart diminished being as such. Therefore, a created thing, which is a derivative being, does not have everything which it is (e.g., [not] its corruptibility, divisibility, imperfection, difference, plurality, and the like) from the eternal, indivisible, most perfect, undifferentiated, and one Maximum — nor from any positive cause. (90; 98)

But what is it then due to? Must it not derive from the Maximum in some way? But how is this to be understood?

An infinite line is infinite straightness, which is the cause of all linear being. Now, with respect to being a line, a curved line is from the infinite line; but with respect to being curved, it is not from the infinite line. Rather, the curvature follows upon finitude, since a line is curved because it is not the maximum line. For if it were the maximum line, it would not be curved, as was shown previously. Similarly with things: since they cannot be the Maximum, it happens that they are diminished, other differentiated, and the like — none of which [characteristics] have a cause. Therefore, a created thing has from God the fact that it is one, distinct, and

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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. (99)

Can we think created being by conjoining absolute necessity and contingency? Who, then, can understand created being by conjoining, in created being, the absolute necessity from which it derives and the contingency without which it does not exist? For it seems that the creation, which is neither God nor nothing, is, as it were, after God and before nothing and in between God and nothing — as one of the sages [the reference is to the Book of the XXIV philosophers] says: "God is the opposition to nothing by the mediation of being." Nevertheless, [the creation] cannot be composed of being and not-being. Therefore, it seems neither to be (since it descends from being) nor not to be (since it is before nothing) nor to be a composite of being and nothing. (91; 100)

As Hopkins points out, Cusanus has no intelligible explanation to offer. Creation and thus the being of created things remains finally unintelligible. Indeed, to render it intelligible we would have to be capable of leaping beyond contradictories.

Now, our intellect, which cannot leap beyond contradictories, does not attain to the being of the creation either by means of division or of composition, although it knows that created being derives only from the being of the Maximum. Therefore, derived being is not understandable, because the Being from which [it derives] is not understandable — just as the adventitious being of an accident is not understandable if the substance to which it is adventitious is not understood. (91; 100)

Creation is nothing other than God's being all things.

Therefore, if God is all things and if His being all things is creating: how can we deem the creation not to be eternal, since God's being is eternal — indeed, is eternity itself? Indeed, insofar as the creation is God's being no one doubts that it is eternity. Therefore, insofar as it is subject to time, it is not from God, who is eternal. Who, then, understands the creation's existing both eternally and temporally? For in Being itself the creation

was not able not to exist eternally; nor was it able to exist before time, since "before" time there was no *before*. And so, the creation always existed, from the time it was able to exist. (91; 101)

How then does Cusanus understand the creation account? In this chapter Cusanus insists on the incomprehensibility of creation.

Who is he, then, who can understand how it is that the one, infinite Form is participated in different ways by different created things? (102; 103)

Nor can we understand how it is that God can be made manifest to us through visible creatures. For [God is] not [manifest] analogously to our intellect, which is known only to God and to ourselves and which, when it commences to think, receives from certain images in the memory a form of a color, a sound, or something else. Prior [to this reception] the intellect was without form, and subsequently thereto it assumes another form — whether of signs, utterances, or letters — and manifests itself to others [besides itself and God]. (103)

The analogy between God and the intellect is of interest. Our intellect, too, is not manifest as such. To become manifest it has to express itself, in bodily gestures, in language. This presupposes that there is something to be expressed, i.e. thoughts that in turn presuppose experience. But God is not in need of anything other than himself in order to create.

All things are said by Cusanus to be in the image of the Maximum. They differ from it only contingently.

Who could understand the following?: how all things are the image of that one, infinite Form and are different contingently — as if a created thing were a god manqué [*occasionatus*], just as an accident is a substance manqué, and a woman is a man manqué. For the Infinite Form is received only finitely, so that every created thing is, as it were, a finite infinity or a created god, so that it exists in the way in which this can best occur. (92-93; 104)

The word "manqué" and the reference to woman here deserves some comment. "Manqué" describes a person who has failed to live up to expectations. *Occasionatus*, not found in classical Latin, suggests that something that came into being in an accidental

fashion. The passage looks back to Thomas Aquinas who in turn follows Aristotle's account of generation, but supplements in an interesting way.⁴² In his *Summa Theologiae* (1, 92, 1) Aquinas writes the following:

With respect to the particular nature the female is something defective and *occasionatum*, for the active force in the male semen intends to produce a perfect likeness of itself in the male sex; but if a female should be generated, this is because of a weakness of the active force, or because of some indisposition of the material, or even because of a transmutation [brought about] by an outside influence. ... But with respect to universal nature the female is not something *occasionatum*, but is by nature's intention ordained for the work of generation. Now the intention of universal nature depends on God, who is the universal author of nature. Therefore, in instituting nature, God produced not only the male but also the female.

That casts interesting light on Cusanus' understanding of the relationship of the creator to creation. God is to creation as man is to woman, but as woman is said to be necessary to nature's work of generation and thus to nature, so creation is necessary to God.

But not all that much light! The fact of creation and its perfection remain unintelligible. How, e.g. does what Cusanus have to say square with the creation account found in the Bible. That Wenck should have objected is to be expected: Propositions from the second and the third chapter are joined by Wenck in his statement of Cusanus' Seventh Thesis:

> Seventh thesis: The creation always existed, from the time it was able to exist; for the creation is God's being. Who, indeed, can understand that God is the Form of being and nevertheless is not mingled with the creation but is one enfolding of all things? For God is the enfolding of all things in that all things are in Him; and He is the unfolding of all things in that He is in all things —just as, by way of illustration, number is the unfolding of oneness, and just as a point is the perfection of magnitudes, identity, the enfolding of difference, equality [the enfolding] of inequality, and

⁴² See Michael Nolan, "What Aquinas Never Said About Women,"

simplicity, [the enfolding] of divisions. (DIL 35; 35)

Wenck charges that the thesis destroys the meaning of creation

This thesis destroys [the status of] the creation; for a condition of the creation is that the creation has not always existed. Moreover, since God Himself always exists, how can the creation be God's being? For although the First Good is desired formally (*exemplariter*) in every good, nevertheless the First Good is not augmented from creatures. (DIL 35-36; 35-36)

The reply given by Cusanus in ADI emphasizes that all these chapters really claim is that the way in which the being of Creation derives from Absolute Being can neither be expressed nor understood.

> The Teacher picked up a copy of *Learned Ignorance* and read the second and the third chapters of Book Two. And he showed clearly that the seventh thesis, together with its corollaries, was excerpted perversely. For in those chapters nothing is expressly dealt with other than [the view] that the being of creation derives from Absolute Being in a manner which can neither be expressed nor understood; there is no other assertion, although different modes of discourse are touched upon. (64; 33)

> > 4

Chapter Three: In a way that cannot be understood the Maximum enfolds and unfolds all things.

In this chapter Cusanus addresses the question: in what sense may things be said to be in God and God in things, a question of special importance, given the charge that Cusanus is a pantheist. Crucial here is the pair *complicatio* and *explicatio*. All things are enfolded in God, the universe is the unfolding of God as quantity is the unfolding of oneness

With respect to quantity, which is the unfolding of oneness, one-ness is said to be a point. For in quantity only a point is present. Just as everywhere in a line — no matter where you divide it — there is a point,

November 1998, http://www.firstthings.com/article/1998/11/003-what-aquinas-never-said-about-women.

so [the same thing holds true] for a surface and a material object. And yet, there is not more than one point. This one point is not anything other than infinite oneness; for infinite oneness is a point which is the end, the perfection, and the totality of line and quantity, which it enfolds. The first unfolding of the point is the line, in which only the point is present. (93; 105)

Similarly rest is enfolded motion, motion, unfolded rest. The present enfolds time. Time is the unfolded present.

In like manner, if you consider [the matter] carefully: rest is oneness which enfolds motion, and motion is rest ordered serially. Hence, motion is the unfolding of rest. In like manner, the present, or the now, enfolds time. The past was the present, and the future will become the present. Therefore, nothing except an ordered present is found in time. Hence, the past and the future are the unfolding of the present. The present is the enfolding of all present times; and the present times are the unfolding, serially, of the present; and in the present times only the present is found. Therefore, the present is one enfolding of all times. (93-94; 106)

The passage brings to mind Schopenhauer's World as Will and Representation:

Above all, we must clearly recognize that the form of the phenomenon of the will, and hence the form of life or of reality, is really only the *present*, not the future or the past. Future and past are only in the concept, exist only in the connexion and continuity of knowledge insofar as this follows the principle of sufficient reason. No man has lived in the past, and none will live in the future; the present alone is the form of all life, but it is also life's sure possession which can never be torn from it. The present always exists together with its content; both stand firm without wavering, like the rainbow on the waterfall. For life is sure and certain to the will, and the present is sure and certain to life. (WWR I, 278)

To explain the relation of creator and creation Cusanus once again draws on the number analogy:

To explain my meaning by numerical examples: Number is the unfolding of oneness. Now, number bespeaks reasoning. But reasoning is from a

mind. Therefore, the brutes, which do not have a mind, are unable to number. Therefore, just as number arises from our mind by virtue of the fact that we understand what is commonly one as individually many: so the plurality of things [arises] from the Divine Mind (in which the many are present without plurality, because they are present in Enfolding Oneness). (94; 108)

But having drawn on this analogy, Cusanus goes on to insist that divine enfolding and unfolding surpasses the measure of our mind:

However, the mode of enfolding and unfolding surpasses [the measure of] our mind. Who, I ask, could understand how it is that the plurality of things is from the Divine Mind? (94; 109)

Does it help us to say that the plurality of creation results from God's presence in nothing? How is this nothing to be thought in relationship to God. As the nothing that separates Father and Son?

There remains only to say that the plurality of things arises from the fact that God is present in nothing. For take away God from the creation and nothing remains. (95; 110)

Wenck objects to this claim:

This corollary deprives God of His own being — since, in nothing, being is nothing. (36; 36)

Cusanus draws on the relationship of substance to accident to clarify this point.

Take away substance from a composite and no accident remains; and so, nothing remains. How can our intellect fathom this? For although an accident perishes when the substance is removed, an accident is not therefore nothing. However, the accident perishes because its being is adventitious being. And hence, a quantity, for example, exists only through the being of a substance; nevertheless, because quantity is present, the substance is quantitative by virtue of quantity. But [the relationship between God and the creation is] not similar. For the creation is not adventitious to God in a correspondingly similar manner; for it does not confer anything on God, as an accident [confers something] on a substance. Indeed, an accident confers [something] on a substance to such

an extent that, as a result, the substance cannot exist without some accident, even though the accident derives its own being from the substance. But with God a similar thing cannot hold true. (95; 110)

But this explanation does not really help matters. Creation remains unintelligible: And yet we do seem to know something about God:

> You might reply: "God's omnipotent will is the cause; His will and omnipotence are His being; for the whole of theology is circular." If so, then you will have to admit that you are thoroughly ignorant of how enfolding and unfolding occur and that you know only that you do not know the manner, even if you know (1) that God is the enfolding and the unfolding of all things, (2) that insofar as He is the enfolding, in Him all things are Himself, and (3) that insofar as He is the unfolding, in all things He is that which they are, just as in an image the reality itself (*veritas*) is present. (95-96; 111)

Cusanus offers the symbol of the relationship of a person to different pictorial representations.

Chapter Four: The universe, which is only the contracted maximum, is a likeness of the Absolute Maximum.

If we understand God as the Absolute Maximum and the universe as the contracted maximum, we can expect the latter to participate in what befits the former in a contracted way. Measured by the infinite, everything finite may seem to shrink to a point. But *contractum* also means the concrete, our reality.

Therefore, [regarding] those things which in Book One were made known to us about the Absolute Maximum: as they befit the maximally Absolute absolutely, so I affirm that they befit in a contracted way what is contracted. (96; 112)

Cusanus seeks to explain the nature of contraction further in the following passage: From these [observations] an inquirer can infer many points. For example, just as God, since He is immense, is neither in the sun nor in the moon, although in them He is, absolutely, that which they are: so the universe is neither in the sun nor in the moon; but in them it is, contractedly, that which they are. Now, the Absolute Quiddity of the sun is not other than the Absolute Quiddity of the moon (since [this] is God Himself, who is the Absolute Being and Absolute Quiddity of all things); but the contracted quiddity of the sun *is* other than the contracted quiddity of the moon (for as the Absolute Quiddity of a thing is not the thing, so the contracted [quiddity of a thing] is none other than the thing). Therefore, [the following] is clear: that since the universe is contracted quiddity, which is contracted in one way in the sun and in another way in the moon, the identity of the universe exists in difference, just as its oneness exists in plurality. Hence, although the universe is neither the sun nor the moon, nevertheless in the sun it is the sun and in the moon it is the moon. However, it is not the case that God is in the sun sun and in the moon moon; rather, [in them] He is that which is sun and moon without plurality and difference. Universe bespeaks universality — i.e., a oneness of many things. Accordingly, just as humanity is neither Socrates nor Plato but in Socrates is Socrates and in Plato is Plato, so is the universe in relation to all things. (115)

We should note the way with Cusanus terms like "One," "universe," "humanity," 'God" straddle the ontic-ontological divide.

Wenck criticizes this view, calling the view that "the Absolute Quiddity of the sun is not other than the Absolute Quiddity of the moon" since "it is God Himself, who is the Absolute Being and Absolute Quiddity of all things" "abominable" and the view that in the sun the universe is the sun, in the moon the moon "incompatible with every philosophy." (DIL 36; 36)

Cusanus' reply is brief and dismissive, repeating his position and insisting on the orthodoxy of the view (ADI 64; 33)

Chapter Five: Each thing is in each thing

Cusanus goes on to use the foregoing to cast some light on the Anaxagorean: "Each thing is in each thing." In each created thing the universe is this created thing. That is to say: in each created thing the totality of all created things is this created thing. This invites thoughts of Leibniz.

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Every actually existing things contracts all things, which in it, are actually what it is, but God is the actuality of all things. Once again Cusanus draws on analogies:

Consider an example: It is evident that an infinite line is a line, a triangle, a circle, and a sphere. Now, every finite line has its being from the infinite line, which is all that which the finite line is. Therefore, in the finite line all that which the infinite line is — viz., line, triangle, and the others — is that which the finite line is. Therefore, in the finite line every figure is the finite line. In the finite line there is not actually either a triangle, a circle, or a sphere; for from what is actually many, there is not made what is actually one. For it is not the case that each thing is in each thing actually; rather, in the line the triangle is the line; and in the line the circle is the line; and so on. In order that you may see more clearly: A line cannot exist actually except in a material object, as will be shown elsewhere. Now, no one doubts that all figures are enfolded in a material object. which has length, width, and depth. Therefore, in an actually existing line all figures are actually the line; and in [an actually existing] triangle [all figures are] the triangle; and so on. In a stone all things are stone; in a vegetative soul, vegetative soul; in life, life; in the senses, the senses; in sight, sight; in hearing, hearing; in imagination, imagination; in reason, reason; in intellect, intellect; in God, God. See, then, how it is that the oneness of things, or the universe, exists in plurality and, conversely, the plurality [of things] exists in oneness. (99; 119)

The oneness of the universe is linked to God. Could one use here the metaphor of a work of art? Cusanus instead appeals to the unity of an organism:

For since the eye cannot actually be the hands, the feet, and all the other members, it is content with being the eye; and the foot [is content with being] the foot. And all members contribute [something] to one another, so that each is that which it is in the best way it can be. Neither the hand nor the foot is in the eye; but in the eye they are the eye insofar as the eye is immediately in the man. And in like manner, in the foot all the members [are the foot] insofar as the foot is immediately in the man. Thus, each member through each member is immediately in the man; and the man, or the whole, is in each member through each member, just as in the parts the whole is in each part through each part. (100; 121) Therefore, suppose you consider humanity as if it were something absolute, unmixable, and incontractible; and [suppose you] consider a man in whom absolute humanity exists absolutely and from which humanity there exists the contracted humanity which the man is. In that case, the absolute humanity is, as it were, God; and the contracted humanity is, as it were, the universe. The absolute humanity is in the man principally, or antecedently, and is in each member or each part subsequently; and the contracted humanity is in the eye eye, in the heart heart, etc., and so, in each member is contractedly each member. Thus, in accordance with this supposition, we have found (1) a likeness of God and the world, and (2) guidance with respect to all the points touched upon in these two chapters, together with (3) many other points which follow from this [comparison]. (100; 122)

8. Matter and Becoming

1

Last time we began our discussion of the second book. The title of the first chapter already raises the question: If whatever is not the Absolute Maximum is finite, the Absolute Maximum alone would seem to deserve to be called infinite. How then can Cusanus now apply the term to the universe: In what sense can it be said to be infinite? In what sense finite? As we saw, the universe is in its essence finite in that is the realm of the more and less. In that realm we never arrive at the maximum. But just this inability suggests a kind of infinity, where infinity implies a lack. Just as I will never arrive at a largest number by adding number to number, so I will never be able to conceive the universe as a whole, i.e. as a universe (universe: turned to one). And yet, must I not be able to think it as a whole in order to think it as a universe, i.e. as a unity? There does seem to be a sense in which all that is is gathered into one.

This leads Cusanus to draw a distinction between the **negatively** and the **privatively infinite.** The universe is infinite in the latter sense in that it has no boundaries; nothing lies beyond it.

The universe, thought as a the totality of what is, cannot be thought greater than it is, because then we would have to be able to think a possible beyond, but this we cannot do. In this sense we cannot comprehend the finitude of the universe. We cannot understand the universe as finite. There is a sense in which the universe, then, too, is *infinitum* and *maximum*. But since it is finite all the same, in so far as it is a realm that invites talk of more and less, the universe must exist as the infinite in a **contracted** manner: it is the *maximum contractum*. But what is the meaning of this *contractio*?

The universe is a contracted maximum in that it is a plurality of different things. It would seem to stand in somewhat the same relationship to God as the idea of all finite numbers stands to the maximum number or a universal, say redness to particular red things. But such analogies must of course do violence to the absolute infinity of God and thus be misleading.

106

2

Chapter Six: The enfolding, and the degree of contraction, of the universe

I find this a difficult chapter. Cusanus' use of numerical analogies invites questioning. I shall return to it briefly a bit later. But first let me note that Hopkins is right to point to this chapter as one place where Cusanus makes clear his desire to remain close to the Aristotelian position:

> And in this way the Peripatetics speak the truth [when they say that] universals do not actually exist independently of things. For only what is particular exists actually. In the particular, universals are contractedly the particular. Nevertheless, in the order of nature universals have a certain universal being which is contractible by what is particular. [I do] not [mean] that before contraction they exist actually and in some way other than according to the natural order ([i.e., other than] as a contractible universal which exists not in itself but in that which is actual, just as a point, a line, and a surface precede, in progressive order, the material object in which alone they exist actually). For because the universe exists actually only in a contracted way, so too do all universals. Although universals do not exist as actual apart from particulars, nevertheless they are not mere rational entities. (101; 125)

Cusanus here attempts to steer a middle course between Platonism and nominalism. The general, according to him, exists only in particular things. Universals are products of our thinking about things (*universa post rem*). They are arrived at by a process of abstraction. But we have to recognize that the family resemblances we detect in things are not imported by us into the things. They have their foundation in reality. This much we have to grant the Platonists. Hence it is this middle course that, if essentially incapable of being rendered clear and distinct, we nevertheless must steer.

For example, dogs and the other animals of the same species are united by virtue of the common specific nature which is in them. This nature would be contracted in them even if Plato's intellect had not, from a comparison of likenesses, formed for itself a species. Therefore, with respect to its own operation, understanding follows being and living; for [merely] through its own operation understanding can bestow neither being nor

living nor understanding. Now, with respect to the things understood: the intellect's understanding follows, through a likeness, being and living and the intelligibility of nature. Therefore, universals, which it makes from comparison, are a likeness of the universals contracted in things. (102; 126)

This invites us to understand the mind in the image of the universe and vice versa. The human mind unfolds itself in the comprehended cosmos, as God unfolds himself in the created cosmos.

Harder to understand is the discussion that introduces this account. The number symbolism here seems perhaps too playful. Why the privileging of the number 10, the mapping of the sequence 1 - 10 - 100 - 1000 (point - line - square - cube) unto God - universe as the oneness of the ten categories - genera – species? The point seems forced. We should keep in mind that at the time Arabic numbers were a relatively new thing. Most readers were more familiar with Roman numerals. Cusanus refers the reader to an impending work of his, *De Conjecturis*, where we find a much more elaborate discussion of what he has in mind. There he invites the reader to consider the way we arrive at ten by adding 1, 2, 3, and 4. Repeating the same pattern we arrive at 100, and then at 1000, which is the cube of 10.

Obvious is the reference to Aristrotle's ten categories. Everything that exists, according to Aristotle, is determined by these ten categories.

And so, we find three universal onenesses descending by degrees to what is particular, in which they are contracted, so that they are actually the particular. The first and absolute Oneness enfolds all things absolutely; the first contracted [oneness enfolds] all things contractedly. But order requires [the following]: that Absolute Oneness be seen to enfold, as it were, the first contracted [oneness], so that by means of it [it enfolds] all other things; that the first contracted [oneness] be seen to enfold the second contracted [oneness] and, by means of it, the third contracted [oneness]; and that the second contracted [oneness be seen to enfold] the third contracted oneness, which is the last universal oneness, fourth from the first, so that by means of the third contracted oneness the second oneness arrives at what is particular. (101; 124)

108

3

The next four chapters (7 - 10) are held together by the concept of **trinity**. Just as God, the maximum, is a trinity, so is the contracted maximum, the universe: the trinity that marks the universe is that of **matter** (ch. 8), **form** (ch. 9), and **motion** (ch. 10).

Chapter Seven: The Trinity of the Universe

This chapter has an introductory character and prepares for the following discussion. It begins by restating what in Book I had been said about God as the Trinity, and continues by pointing out how the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and God differs from the trinitarian structure of the universe.

In God it is not the case that Oneness exists contractedly in Trinity as a whole exists [contractedly] in its parts or as a universal exists [contractedly] in particulars; rather, the Oneness is the Trinity. Therefore, each of the persons [of the Trinity] is the Oneness; and since the Oneness is Trinity, one person is not another person. But in the case of the universe a similar thing cannot hold true. Therefore, [in the case of the universe] the three mutual relationships — which in God are called persons — have actual existence only collectively in oneness. (102; 127)

The Trinitarian structure is present in all God has created, more especially in the universe; as the realm of contraction the universe is a trinity.

For there cannot be contraction without (1) that which is contractible, (2) that which causes contracting [*contrahens*], and (3) the union which is effected through the common actuality [*actum*] of these two. (103; 128)

Think of a piece of wax on which a form is imposed and of the formed wax

Therefore, the oneness of the universe is three, since it is from possibility, connecting necessity, and union — which can be called possibility [*potentia*], actuality [*actus*], and union [*nexus*]. And herefrom infer four universal modes of being. There is the mode of being which is called Absolute Necessity, according as God is Form of forms, Being of beings, and Essence (*ratio*) or Quiddity of things. With regard to this mode of being: in God all things are Absolute Necessity itself. Another mode [of
being] is according as things exist in the connecting necessity; in this necessity, just as in a mind, the forms-of-things, true in themselves, exist with a distinction, and an order, of nature. We shall see later whether this is so. Another mode of being is according as, in determined possibility, things are actually this or that. And the lowest mode of being is according as things are possible to be, and it is absolute possibility. (103-104; 130–131)

Drawing here on Thierry of Chartres, Cusanus infers thus four modes of being:

1. Absolute Necessity: God as Form of forms, Being of beings, and Essence or Quiddity of things.

2. The principle of order. Things have their distinct places in an order, a space of forms, a nexus.

3. Determined possibility: things are actually this or that.

4. Absolute possibility

The first and last are more difficult to comprehend than the middle two. About the incomprehensibility of God enough has been said. But what is absolute possibility?

Chapter Eight: The Possibility, or Matter of the Universe

This chapter develops the notion of **possibility**. It begins with a reference to the ancients.

To expound here, at least briefly, upon the things which can make our ignorance learned, let me discuss for a moment the previously mentioned three modes of being — beginning with possibility. The ancients made many statements about possibility; the opinion of them all was that from nothing nothing is made. And so, they maintained that there is a certain absolute possibility of being all things and that it is eternal. They believed that in absolute possibility all things are enfolded as possibilities. (104; 132)

That from nothing is made can be traced back to Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 12062b 24 f; *Physics* 187 a 27f.) There must therefore be something like prime matter as the ground of the possibility of all things.

Cusanus turns next to a consideration of the Platonists and what is said to be their trinitarian conception of possibility.

The Platonists called absolute possibility "lack," [*carentia*] since it lacks all form. Because it lacks, it desires. And by virtue of the following fact it is aptitude [a*ptitudo*]: viz., it obeys necessity, which commands it (i.e., draws it toward actually being), just as wax [obeys] the craftsman who wills to make something from it. But formlessness [*informitas*] proceeds from, and unites, lack and aptitude — so that absolute possibility is, as it were, incompositely trine. For lack, aptitude, and formlessness cannot be its parts; for if they were, something would precede absolute possibility — which is impossible. Hence, [lack, aptitude, and formlessness] are modes in whose absence absolute possibility would not be absolute. For lack exists contingently in possibility. For from the fact that possibility does not have the form it can have, it is said to be lacking. Hence, it is lack. (105; 133)

This formless matter is brought to life when the world-soul mingles with it. The **privative infinity of matter** is contrasted with God's **negative infinity**. There is no pure possibility, except in God.

Therefore, every possibility is contracted. But it is contracted through actuality. Therefore, pure possibility — altogether undetermined by any actuality — is not to be found. (106; 137)

Pure possibility is not to be found, just as there cannot be a pure actuality, except in God. The contraction of possibility necessitates an affinity between matter and form.

> Furthermore, unless the possibility of things were contracted, there could not be a reason for things but everything would happen by chance, as Epicurus falsely maintained. That this world sprang forth rationally from possibility was necessarily due to the fact that the possibility had an aptitude only for being this world. Therefore, the possibility's aptitude was contracted and not absolute. The same holds true regarding the earth, the sun, and other things: unless they had been latently present in matter — [present] in terms of a certain contracted possibility — there would have

been no more reason why they would have been brought forth into actuality than not.

Hence, although God is infinite and therefore had the power to create the world as infinite, nevertheless because the possibility was, necessarily, contracted and was not at all absolute or infinite aptitude, the world — in accordance with the possibility of being — was not able to be actually infinite or greater or to exist in any other way [than it does]. (138-139)

The source of the Epicurus reference is John of Salisbury to whom Cusanus also would seem to owe much of his understanding of the *Timaeus*. We should keep in mind that until Ficino's complete translation, the *Timaeus*_was the only Platonic dialogue known to the Middle Ages, and that only in an incomplete translation (to 53c) by Chalcidius (ca. 321), who accompanied it with a widely read commentary.

Chapter Nine: The Soul, or form of the universe

The title is a bit puzzling. Soul (*anima*) and form (*forma*) would seem to have rather different connotations. Soul suggests an active principle, form something like a structure imposed on matter. Cusanus' discussion moves in a way from soul to form. His take on the Platonic doctrine of forms is at the center of this chapter.

Once again the ancients, especially the Platonists provide the initial point of reference.

All the wise agree that possible being cannot come to be actual except through actual being; for nothing can bring itself into actual being, lest it be the cause of itself; for it would be before it was. Hence, they said that that which actualizes possibility does so intentionally, so that the possibility comes to be actual by rational ordination and not by chance. Some called this excellent [actualizing] nature "mind"; others called it "Intelligence," others "world-soul," others "fate substantified," others (e.g., the Platonists) "connecting necessity." The Platonists thought that possibility is necessarily determined through this necessity, so that possibility now actually is that which it was beforehand able to be by nature. (107; 142)

Cusanus speaks of the Platonists. The concept of a world soul can indeed be traced back to the *Timaeus* (Tim. 34b), available to Cusanus in the incomplete translation by Chalcidius. Here the relevant passage:

Such was the whole plan of the eternal God about the god that was to be; he made it smooth and even, having a surface in every direction equidistant from the center, a body entire and perfect, and formed out of perfect bodies. And in the center he put the soul, which he diffused throughout the body, making it also to be the exterior environment of it, and he made the universe a circle moving in a circle, one and solitary, yet by reason of its excellence able to converse with itself, and needing no other friendship or acquaintance. Having these purposes in view he created the world a blessed god. (trans. Benjamin Jowett)

The world is here understood in the image of an animated body. That Christian Platonists such as Abelard should have made of the World Soul the Holy Spirit cannot surprise us. Cusanus knows this tradition. But, as I already suggested, in this chapter he is concerned with the form of the universe, i.e. with the second person of the Trinity, with the Word. The Holy Spirit is discussed in the following chapter.

Cusanus is concerned to eliminate an ontological realm between creation and creator, such as the world-soul or a realm of forms. Such an understanding had to be rejected, for failing to do justice to the unity of God. We should note that Wenck misunderstands Cusanus on this point:

The first corollary of the same eighth thesis: *The world-soul is the unfolding of the Divine Mind. This is evident because all things* — *which in God are one Exemplar* — *are, in the world-soul, many distinct* [*exemplars*]. (DIL 36; 36)

Wenck objects that this introduces a complexity into the world-soul that the Christian must reject. But what Cusanus actually says is very different:

However, [the following view] was acceptable to the Platonists: that such a distinct plurality of exemplars in the connecting necessity is — in a natural order — from one infinite Essence, in which all things are one. Nevertheless, they did not believe that the exemplars were created by this [one infinite Essence] but that they descended from it in such way that the statement "God exists" is never true without the statement "The worldsoul exists" also being true. And they affirmed that the world-soul is the unfolding of the Divine Mind, so that all things — which in God are one Exemplar — are, in the world-soul, many distinct [exemplars]. (108; 143)

According to Cusanus nothing exists to mediate between God and creation. Here the break with the Platonists is apparent.

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God alone is absolute; all other things are contracted. Nor is there a medium between the Absolute and the contracted as those imagined who thought that the world-soul is mind existing subsequently to God but prior to the world's contraction. For only God is "world-soul" and "world-mind"—in a manner whereby "soul" is regarded as something absolute in which all the forms of things exist actually. (111; 150)

Therefore, forms do not have actual existence except (1) in the Word as Word and (2) contractedly in things. But although the forms which are in the created intellectual nature exist with a greater degree of independence, in accordance with the intellectual nature, nevertheless they are not uncontracted; and so, they *are* the intellect, whose operation is to understand by means of an abstract likeness, as Aristotle says. (111; 150)

Agreeing with Aristotle on this point, Cusanus thus rejects a realm of forms. And yet, in this chapter Cusanus shows that he is anything but an Aristotelian. The Platonists are thought to have done better justice to the intelligibility of the world.

And so, the mode-of-being that is in the world-soul is [the mode] in accordance with which we say that the world is intelligible. The mode of actual being — which results from the actual determination of possibility by way of unfolding — is, as was said, the mode of being according to which the world is perceptible, in the opinion of the Platonists. They did not claim that forms as they exist in matter are other than forms which exist in the world-soul but [claimed] only that forms exist according to different modes of being: in the world-soul [they exist] truly and in themselves; in matter [they exist] not in their purity but in concealment — as likenesses. [The Platonists] added that the truth of forms is attained only through the intellect; through reason, imagination, and sense, nothing but images [are attained], according as the forms are mixed with possibility. And [they maintained] that therefore they did not attain to anything truly but [only] as a matter of opinion. (108; 144)

Things present themselves to us exhibiting significant resemblances. Our creation of concepts that capture universals reflects this. This intelligibility of the world is something that resides in it, not in us. This the Platonists recognized. But we should not reify these into forms. In an important sense there is only one form.

Therefore, there cannot be many distinct exemplars, for each exemplar would be maximum and most true with respect to the things which are its exemplifications. But it is not possible that there be many maximal and most true things. For only one infinite Exemplar is sufficient and necessary; in it all things exist, as the ordered exists in the order. (110; 148)

But we should note how close Cusanus, despite this difference, remains all the same to Platonism.

The Platonists thought that all motion derives from this world-soul, which they said to be present as a whole in the whole world and as a whole in each part of the world. Nevertheless, it does not exercise the same powers in all parts [of the world] — just as in man the rational soul does not operate in the same way in the hair and in the heart, although it is present as a whole in the whole [man] and in each part. Hence, the Platonists claimed that in the world-soul all souls — whether in bodies or outside [of bodies] — are enfolded. For they asserted that the world-soul is spread throughout the entire universe — [spread] not through parts (because it is simple and indivisible) but as a whole in the earth, where it holds the earth together, as a whole in stone, where it effects the steadfastness of the stone's parts, as a whole in water, as a whole in trees, and so on for each thing. The world-soul is the first circular unfolding (the Divine Mind being the center point, as it were, and the world-soul being the circle which unfolds the center) and is the natural enfolding of the whole temporal order of things. Therefore, because of the world-soul's

distinctness and order, the Platonists called it "self-moving number" and asserted that it is from sameness and difference. They also thought that the world-soul differs from the human soul only in number, so that just as the human soul is to man so the world-soul is to the universe. [Moreover,] they believed that all souls are from the world-soul and that ultimately they are resolved into it, provided their moral failures do not prevent this. (108-109; 145)

Christian thinkers, Cusanus points out, found this an attractive account, making of Plato's forms timeless concepts residing in God's creative mind.

[These Christians] support their view by the authority of divine Scripture: "God said 'Let there be light,' and light was made." If the truth of light had not been naturally antecedent, what sense would it have made for Him to say "Let there be light"? And if the truth of light had not been antecedent, then after the light was temporally unfolded, why would it have been called light rather than something else? Such [Christians] adduce many similar considerations to support this view. (109; 146)

According to Cusanus these Christians recognized something that Aristotle missed: The Peripatetics, although admitting that the work of nature is the work of intelligence, do not admit that there are exemplars. I think that they are surely wrong — unless by "intelligence" they mean God. (109;147)

But Aristotle does not know such an intelligent creator God. This lets Cusanus side with the Platonists, if with reservations:

The Platonists spoke quite keenly and sensibly, being reproached, unreasonably, perhaps, by Aristotle, who endeavored to refute them with a covering of words rather than with deep discernment. But through learned ignorance I shall ascertain what the truer [view] is. I have [already] indicated that we do not attain to the unqualifiedly Maximum and that, likewise, absolute possibility or absolute form (i.e., [absolute] actuality) which is not God cannot exist. And [I indicated] that no being except God is uncontracted and that there is only one Form of forms and Truth of truths and that the maximum truth of the circle is not other than that of the quadrangle. Hence, the forms of things are not distinct except as they exist contractedly; as they exist absolutely they are one, indistinct [Form], which is the Word in God. (110; 148)

The world-soul is thus understood by Cusanus as the divine Word, the form of all forms, which is one with God.

Chapter Ten: The Spirit of All Things

Once again traditional philosophy furnishes the point of departure.

Certain [thinkers] believed that motion, through which there is the union of form and matter, is a spirit — a medium, as it were, between form and matter. They considered it as pervading the firmament, the planets, and things terrestrial. The first [motion] they called "Atropos" — "without turning," so to speak; for they believed that by a simple motion the firmament is moved from east to west. The second [motion] they called "Clotho," i.e., turning; for the planets are moved counter to the firmament through a turning from west to east. The third [motion they called]

"Lachesis," i.e., fate, because chance governs terrestrial things. (112; 151) Once again Chalcidius commentary on the *Timaeus* would seem to be the ultimate source, mediated however by other writers such as John of Salisbury. The general picture is Platonic-Aristotelian.

> The motion of the planets is as an unrolling of the first motion; and the motion of temporal and terrestrial things is the unrolling of the motion of the planets. Certain causes of coming events are latent in terrestrial things, as the produce [is latent] in the seed. Hence, [these thinkers] said that the things enfolded in the world-soul as in a ball are unfolded and extended through such motion. For the wise thought as if [along the following line]: a craftsman [who] wants to chisel a statue in stone and [who] has in himself the form of the statue, as an idea, produces — through certain instruments which he moves — the form of the statue in imitation of the idea; analogously, they thought, the

world-mind or world-soul harbors in itself exemplars-of-things, which, through motion it unfolds in matter. (112; 151)

Cusanus, as expected from the preceding and as we shall see in some detail in the following chapters, will call the presupposed hierarchical understanding of the cosmos into question. The idea of a firmament is incompatible with his understanding of learned ignorance.

Therefore, it is not the case that any motion is unqualifiedly maximum motion, for this latter coincides with rest. Therefore, no motion is absolute, since absolute motion is rest and is God. And absolute motion enfolds all motions. Therefore, just as all possibility exists in Absolute Possibility, which is the Eternal God, and all form and actuality exist in Absolute Form, which is the Father's divine Word and Son, so all uniting motion and all uniting proportion and harmony exist in the Divine Spirit's Absolute Union, so that God is the one Beginning of all things. In Him and through Him all things exist in a certain oneness of trinity. They are contracted in a like manner in greater and lesser degree (within [the range between] the unqualifiedly Maximum and the unqualifiedly Minimum) according to their own gradations, so that in intelligent things, where to understand is to move, the gradation of possibility, actuality, and their uniting motion is one gradation, and in corporeal things, where to exist is to move, [the gradation] of matter, form, and their union is another gradation. I will touch upon these points elsewhere. Let the preceding [remarks] about the trinity of the universe suffice for the present. (113-114; 155)

The denial of absolute rest and motion will prove of special importance to us in the concluding chapters of Book Two.

9. The Condition of the Earth

1

Let me begin by returning to **Chapter Ten: The Spirit of All Things.** At the center of this chapter is the idea of motion. Motion has always been difficult to think. To think motion is to think something like the intersection of time and eternity: something stable moves in time. But apart from motion what is time? Think of Plato's definition in the *Timaeus* of time as the moving image of eternity! The definition seems obviously circular in that it presupposes motion. Is to think motion then to think the intersection of nothing and being? Consider once more the following passage:

Certain [thinkers] believed that motion, through which there is the union of form and matter, is a spirit — a medium, as it were, between form and matter. They considered it as pervading the firmament, the planets, and things terrestrial. The first [motion] they called "Atropos" — "without turning," so to speak; for they believed that by a simple motion the firmament is moved from east to west. The second [motion] they called "Clotho," i.e., turning; for the planets are moved counter to the firmament through a turning from west to east. The third [motion they called]

"Lachesis," i.e., fate, because chance governs terrestrial things. (112; 151) As we shall see, Cusanus will call the presupposed hierarchical understanding of the cosmos into question: the idea of a firmament is incompatible with his understanding of learned ignorance. But what would seem to interest him here is the trinitarian conception of motion. It is as if God embraced nothing as form informs matter and that embrace is "the Spirit (or wind) of God that was that moving over the face of the waters." (*Gen.* 1, 2) The mystery of motion is the mystery of creation. Creation is the realm of motion. But motion is essentially relative. For absolute motion would presuppose absolute rest. But motion allows no more for rest than space allows for an absolute center or fixed place. What would that mean?

> Therefore, no motion is absolute, since absolute motion is rest and is God. And absolute motion enfolds all motions. (113; 155)

Creation is the moving image of God.

The denial of absolute rest and absolute motion proves of special importance, as we shall see, in the concluding chapters of Book Two.

2

Chapter Eleven: Corollaries regarding motion

The chapter begins by reiterating the point that in any genus it is impossible to arrive at an unqualifiedly maximum or minimum. There is **no fixed center**. And as there is no fixed center there is **no circumference**. And applying the coincidence of opposites Cusanus claims that **the center of the world coincides with its circumference**. And **that center is God**.

However, it is not the case that in any genus — even [the genus] of motion — we come to an ungualifiedly maximum and minimum. Hence, if we consider the various movements of the spheres, [we will see that] it is not possible for the world-machine to have, as a fixed and immovable center, either our perceptible earth or air or fire or any other thing. For, with regard to motion, we do not come to an unqualifiedly minimum i.e., to a fixed center. For the [ungualifiedly] minimum must coincide with the [unqualifiedly] maximum; therefore, the center of the world coincides with the circumference. Hence, the world does not have a [fixed] circumference. For if it had a [fixed] center, it would also have a [fixed] circumference; and hence it would have its own beginning and end within itself, and it would be bounded in relation to something else, and beyond the world there would be both something else and space (*locus*). But all these [consequences] are false. Therefore, since it is not possible for the world to be enclosed between a physical center and [a physical] circumference, the world — of which God is the center and the circumference — is not understood. And although the world is not infinite, it cannot be conceived as finite, because it lacks boundaries within which it is enclosed. (114; 156)

This leads to a denial of **the central position of the earth**. Not that there is a better candidate to occupy the center, say the sun. The very concept of an absolute center cannot be made sense of. Not only Aristotle and Ptolemy, but Copernicus and Kepler

are left behind by such speculations. That central position is claimed to be **no more than a perspectival illusion**.

But is this really the position of Cusanus? At this point it is not yet altogether clear what he is asserting. Does it really entail a radical break with the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic understanding of the cosmos or does it just introduce into it something like an uncertainty principle.

> Therefore, the earth, which cannot be the center, cannot be devoid of all motion. Indeed, it is even necessary that the earth be moved in such way that it could be moved infinitely less. Therefore, just as the earth is not the center of the world, so the sphere of fixed stars is not its circumference — although when we compare the earth with the sky, the former seems [*videatur*] to be nearer to the center, and the latter nearer to the circumference. Therefore, the earth is not the center either of the eighth sphere or of any other sphere. (114-115; 157)

Cusanus grants that the earth is seen to be nearer the center. Our point of view supports geocentrism. The following explanation still seems plausible: It does seem to make sense to speak of a center in a relative sense, for instance of the center of the earth, even though it may be impossible to locate that center with absolute precision. More convincing is the claim that we cannot make sense of the center of the universe in even a relative sense, precisely because we cannot bound it. The unboundedness of the universe causes every attempt to locate its center to suffer shipwreck. In reality there are no fixed poles, although we presuppose such fixed reference points whenever we measure motion.

The following may suggest that Cusanus does hold on to the traditional cosmology if only in a regulative sense, although the considerations already advanced undermine every geocentrism.

Therefore, the earth is not the center either of the eighth sphere or of any other sphere. Moreover, the appearance of the six constellations above the horizon does not establish that the earth is at the center of the eighth sphere. F or even if the earth were at a distance from the center but were on the axis passing through the [sphere's] poles, so that one side [of the earth] were raised toward the one pole and the other side were lowered toward the other pole, then it is evident that only half the sphere would be

visible to men, who would be as distant from the poles as the horizon is extended. Moreover, it is no less false that the center of the world is within the earth than that it is outside the earth; nor does the earth or any other sphere even have a center. For since the center is a point equidistant from the circumference and since there cannot exist a sphere or a circle so completely true that a truer one could not be posited, it is obvious that there cannot be posited a center [which is so true and precise] that a still truer and more precise center could not be posited. Precise equidistance to different things cannot be found except in the case of God, because God alone is Infinite Equality. Therefore, He who is the center of the world, viz., the Blessed God, is also the center of the earth, of all spheres, and of all things in the world. Likewise, He is the infinite circumference of all things. (115; 157)

How radical Cusanus' thinking is, is shown by the following:

And since we can discern motion only in relation to something fixed, viz., either poles or centers, and since we presuppose these [poles or centers] when we measure motions, we find that as we go about conjecturing, we err with regard to all [measurements]. And we are surprised when we do not find that the stars are in the right position according to the rules of measurement of the ancients, for we suppose that the ancients rightly conceived of centers and poles and measures. (115; 159)

That we recognize motion only in relation to something assumed to be fixed is once again a thought not original with Cusanus, but found already with William of Conches.⁴³ Still, a geocentrist can point out that Cusanus, while he claims that the earth moves, as Albert of Saxony (1316-1398, *Quaestiones in libros de caelo et mundo*) had indeed done before him in the 14th century, there nevertheless is a strand in his discussion that ascribes to the earth a lesser motion than to the other planets, which would make his a modified geocentric position. Consider the following:

From these [foregoing considerations] it is evident that the earth is moved. Now, from the motion of a comet, we learn that the elements of air

and of fire are moved; furthermore, [we observe] that the moon [is moved] less from east to west than Mercury or Venus or the sun, and so on progressively. Therefore, the earth is moved even less than all [these] others; but, nevertheless, being a star, it does not describe a minimum circle around a center or a pole. Nor does the eighth sphere describe a maximum [circle], as was just proved. (116; 159)

But this modified geocentrism seems finally incompatible with Cusanus' understanding of the universe as having its center and circumference in God. It would appear to be no more than a natural illusion. The radicality of Cusanus' cosmology becomes apparent in the chapter's concluding paragraph:

Therefore, if with regard to what has now been said you want truly to understand something about the motion of the universe, you must merge the center and the poles, aiding yourself as best you can by your imagination. For example, if someone were on the earth but beneath the north pole [of the heavens] and someone else were at the north pole [of the heavens], then just as to the one on the earth it would appear that the pole is at the zenith, so to the one at the pole it would appear that the center is at the zenith. And just as antipodes have the sky above, as do we, so to those [persons] who are at either pole [of the heavens] the earth would appear to be at the zenith. And at whichever [of these] anyone would be, he would believe himself to be at the center. Therefore, merge these different imaginative pictures so that the center is the zenith and vice versa. Thereupon you will see — through the intellect, to which only learned ignorance is of help — that the world and its motion and shape cannot be apprehended. For [the world] will appear as a wheel in a wheel and a sphere in a sphere — having its center and circumference nowhere, as was stated. (116; 161)

Chapter Twelve: The conditions of the earth

⁴³ See Nikolaus von Kues, *Philosophisch-theologische Werlke*, 4 vols., intr. Karl Bormann, vol. 1, *De docta ignorantia, Die belehrte Unwissenheit*, Book II, p, 135, n. 159.

This came to be perhaps the most often cited chapter of the book. Wenck well recognized its novelty: some of what Cusanus has to say had indeed never been heard before. The chapter begins with a thought experiment that may well reflect an experience that he had when he returned back from Greece, as the concluding letter to Cardinal Cesarini suggests. Copernicus was to invoke it much later to prepare for the reception of his *De Revolutionibus*, where he supports it with a reference to the Aeneid. Cusanus could also found it in William of Conches.

The ancients did not attain unto the points already made, for they lacked learned ignorance. It has already become evident to us that the earth is indeed moved, even though we do not perceive this to be the case. For we apprehend motion only through a certain comparison with something fixed. For example, if someone did not know that a body of water was flowing and did not see the shore while he was on a ship in the middle of the water, how would he recognize that the ship was being moved? And because of the fact that it would always seem to each person (whether he were on the earth, the sun, or another star) that he was at the "immovable" center, so to speak, and that all other things were moved: assuredly, it would always be the case that if he were on the sun, he would fix a set of poles in relation to himself; if on the earth, another set; on the moon, another; on Mars, another; and so on. Hence, the world-machine will have its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere, so to speak; for God, who is everywhere and nowhere, is its circumference and center. (116-117; 162)

The example of the moving ship is to alert us to the power of perspective and perspectival illusion.

Cusanus does give an argument supporting the traditional privileging of the circle and the sphere.

Moreover, the earth is not spherical, as some have said; yet, it tends toward sphericity, for the shape of the world is contracted in the world's parts, just as is [the world's] motion. Now, when an infinite line is considered as contracted in such way that, as contracted, it cannot be more perfect and more capable, it is [seen to be] circular; for

in a circle the beginning coincides with the end. Therefore, the most nearly perfect motion is circular; and the most nearly perfect corporeal shape is therefore spherical. Hence, for the sake of the perfection, the entire motion of the part is oriented toward the whole. For example, heavy things [are moved] toward the earth and light things upwards; earth [is moved] toward earth, water toward water, air toward air, fire toward fire. And the motion of the whole tends toward circular motion as best it can, and all shape [tends toward] spherical shape — as we experience with regard to the parts of animals, to trees, and to the sky. Hence, one motion is more circular and more perfect than another. Similarly, shapes, too, are different. (117; 164)

The old Platonic axiom remains as a regulative ideal. Even for Copernicus the circularity of the orbits of the planets was to remain an axiom of nature. One can only imagine how difficult it must have been for Kepler to break with this axiom, where we should keep in mind that an ellipse is an obliquely seen circle. And we should note how Cusanus here preserves much of the Aristotelian picture, even as he relativizes it and denies it its foundation.

Important here is Cusanus's **rejection of cosmic heterogeneity**. It is indeed a corollary of his understanding of creation. In its place we find a presumption of **cosmic homogeneity**. This leads in turn to an elevation of the earth to the level of the stars. Cusanus is concerned to make sun and earth as much alike as possible:

Therefore, the shape of the earth is noble and spherical, and the motion of the earth is circular; but there could be a more perfect [shape or motion]. And because in the world there is no maximum or minimum with regard to perfections, motions, and shapes (as is evident from what was just said), it is not true that the earth is the lowliest and the lowest. (117; 164)

The position challenged here was the position of e.g. Thomas Aquinas, who insists, following Aristotle and arguing against the Pythagoreans, who would put fire as the most precious thing at the center of the cosmos, that the center should not be so privileged: "but to the mere position we should give the last place rather than the first. For the middle is what is defined, and what defines it is the limit, and that which contains or limits is more precious than that which is limited, seeing that the latter is the

matter and the former the essence of the system." (*De Caelo* II, chapter XIII, lecture 20, 343).⁴⁴ Cusanus rejects that kind of argument.

For although [the earth] seems more central with respect to the world, it is also for this same reason nearer to the pole, as was said. Moreover, the earth is not a proportional part, or an aliquot part, of the world. For since the world does not have either a maximum or a minimum, it also does not have a middle point or aliquot parts [expressible in a mathematical ratio], just as a man or an animal does not either. For example, a hand is not an aliquot part of a man, although its weight does seem to bear a comparative relation to the body— and likewise regarding its size and shape. (117; 164)

Interesting about the following observations, farfetched as they may seem to us, is how they show Cusanus' commitment to the axiom of cosmic homogeneity. With him it takes the form of applying what Aristotle had said about the sublunar realm to the sun and the moon.

Moreover, [the earth's] blackness is not evidence of its lowliness. For, if someone were on the sun, the brightness which is visible to us would not be visible [to him]. For when the body of the sun is considered, [it is seen to] have a certain more central "earth," as it were, and a certain "fiery and circumferential" brightness, as it were, and in its middle a "watery cloud and brighter air," so to speak — just as our earth [has] its own elements. Hence, if someone were outside the region of fire, then through the medium of the fire our earth, which is on the circumference of [this] region, would appear to be a bright star — just as to us, who are on the circumference of the region of the sun, the sun appears to be very bright. Now, the moon does not appear to be so bright, perhaps because we are within its circumference and are facing the more central parts — i.e., are in the moon's "watery region," so to speak. Hence, its light is not visible [to us], although the moon does have its own light, which is visible to those who are at the most outward points of its circumference; but only the

⁴⁴ Thomas Aquinas, In libros Aristotelis De caelo et mundo exposition,

light of the reflection of the sun is visible to us. On this account, too, the moon's heat — which it no doubt produces as a result of its motion and in greater degree on the circumference, where the motion is greater, is not communicated to us, unlike what happens with regard to the sun. Hence, our earth seems to be situated between the region of the sun and the region of the moon; and through the medium of the sun and the moon it partakes of the influence of other stars which — because of the fact that we are outside their regions — we do not see. For we see only the regions of those stars which gleam. (117-118; 164-165)

Cusanus' investment in this axiom of cosmic homogeneity and in rescuing the earth from its supposedly lowly position leads him to quite fantastic if telling constructions.

Therefore, the earth is a noble star which has a light and a heat and an influence that are distinct and different from [that of] all other stars, just as each star differs from each other star with respect to its light, its nature, and its influence. And each star communicates its light and influence to the others, though it does not aim to do so, since all stars gleam and are moved only in order to exist in the best way [they can]; as a consequence thereof a sharing arises (just as light shines of its own nature and not in order that I may see; yet, as a consequence, a sharing occurs when I use light for the purpose of seeing.) (118; 166)

Moreover, we ought not to say that because the earth is smaller than the sun and is influenced by the sun, it is more lowly [than the sun]. For the entire region-of-the-earth, which extends to the circumference of fire, is large. And although the earth is smaller than the sun — as we know from the earth's shadow and from eclipses — we do not know to what extent the *region* of the sun is larger or smaller than the region of the earth. (118-119; 167)

Especially provocative and influential, if not altogether new, proved to be the suggestion that other stars, too, must have their inhabitants:

For example, [we cannot rightly claim to know] that our portion of the world is the habitation of men and animals and vegetables which are proportionally less noble [than] the inhabitants in the region of the sun and of the other stars. For although God is the center and circumference of all stellar regions and although natures of different nobility proceed from Him and inhabit each region (lest so many places in the heavens and on the stars be empty and lest only the earth — presumably among the lesser things — be inhabited), nevertheless with regard to the intellectual natures a nobler and more perfect nature cannot, it seems, be given (even if there are inhabitants of another kind on other stars) than the intellectual nature which dwells both here on earth and in its own region. For man does not desire a different nature but only to be perfected in his own nature.

Therefore, the inhabitants of other stars — of whatever sort these inhabitants might be — bear no comparative relationship to the inhabitants of the earth (*istius mundi*). (119; 169-170)

In the *Timaeus* Plato already considered possible inhabitants of the moon and the planets (42d), as reported by Chalcidius.

Hence, since that entire region is unknown to us, those inhabitants remain altogether unknown. By comparison, here on earth it happens that animals of one species — [animals] which constitute one specific region, so to speak — are united together; and because of the common specific region, they mutually share those things which belong to their region; they neither concern themselves about other [regions] nor apprehend truly anything regarding them. For example, an animal of one species cannot grasp the thought which [an animal] of another [species] expresses through vocal signs — except for a superficial grasping in the case of a very few signs, and even then [only] after long experience and only conjecturally. But we are able to know disproportionally less about the inhabitants of another region. We surmise that in the solar region there are inhabitants which are more solar, brilliant, illustrious, and intellectual — being even more spiritlike than [those] on the moon, where [the inhabitants] are more moonlike, and than [those] on the earth, [where they are] more material

and more solidified. (120; 171)

The opposition of an incorruptible celestial and a corruptible sublunar sphere is rejected, a corollary of the thesis of cosmic homogeneity.

Moreover, the earthly destruction-of-things which we experience is not strong evidence of [the earth's] lowliness. For since there is one universal world and since there are causal relations between all the individual stars, it cannot be evident to us that anything is altogether corruptible; rather, [a thing is corruptible only] according to one or another mode of being, for the causal influences — being contracted, as it were, in one individual — are separated, so that the mode of being such and such perishes. Thus, death does not occupy any space, as Virgil says. For death seems to be nothing except a composite thing's being resolved into its components. And who can know whether such dissolution occurs only in regard to terrestrial inhabitants? (120; 172)

The chapter concludes with a brief summary of different views that have been held concerning what happens after death, where the Platonists think of a return to the world-soul, others to a return to the star to which they belong. But these are idle speculations that have little weight.

Of himself a man cannot know these matters; [he can know them] only if he has [this knowledge] from God in a quite special way. Although no one doubts that the Perfect God created all things for Himself and that He does not will the destruction of any of the things He created, and although everyone knows that God is a very generous rewarder of all who worship Him, nevertheless only God Himself, who is His own Activity, knows the manner of Divine Activity's present and future remuneration. Nevertheless, I will say a few things about this later, according to the divinely inspired truth. At the moment, it suffices that I have, in ignorance, touched upon these matters in the foregoing way. (121; 174)

Chapter Thirteen: The admirable divine art in the creation of the world and of the elements

Much of this chapter is taken up by quite traditional praise of the wisdom of God's creation. God is said to have used arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and likewise music, i.e. the same arts that we use when we investigate things. These sciences, mentioned already in Plato's *Republic*, made up the *quadrivium*, which in the medieval university followed the *trivium*, comprising grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and prepared for the study of theology, law, and medicine. (122; 175). But this correspondence does not mean that we can understand the ways of God. Although Cusanus asserts that God arranged everything in an admirable order we cannot really understand that order.

With regard to these objects, which are so worthy of admiration, so varied, and so different, we recognize — through learned ignorance and in accordance with the preceding points — that we cannot know the rationale for any of God's works but can only marvel; for the Lord is great, whose greatness is without end. (123; 179)

We cannot understand the ways of the creator. Important is the insistence on the **muteness of things**.

But all things reply to him who in learned ignorance asks them what they are or in what manner they exist or for what purpose they exist: "Of ourselves [we are] nothing, and of our own ability we cannot tell you anything other than nothing. For we do not even know ourselves; rather, God alone — through whose understanding we are that which He wills, commands, and knows to be in us — [has knowledge of us]. Indeed, all of us are mute things. He is the one who speaks in [us] all. He has made us; He alone knows what we are, in what manner we exist, and for what purpose. If you wish to know something about us, seek it in our Cause and Reason, not in us. *There* you will find all things, while seeking one thing. And only in Him will you be able to discover yourself. (124; 180)

No longer does nature offer itself to us as a book in which we can read. No longer can we say with Alan of Lille:

Omnis mundi creatura Quasi liber et pictura Nobis est et speculum Nostrae vitae, nostrae mortis, Nostrae status, nostrae sortis Fidele signaculum.

"All the world's creatures are like a book, a picture, or a mirror to us, the truthful sign of our life, death, condition, and destiny." Having become learned about our ignorance, we should not search out the final cause of things. We really understand things only to the extent that we ourselves can make them. A new reality principle announces itself; and corresponding to this reality principle a new insistence on **the godlike creativity of the human knower**.

Next time we shall turn to the third book.

10. The Place of Christ

1

Let me begin by recapitulating our discussion of chapters eleven through thirteen of Book II.

Chapter Eleven begins by reiterating the point that in any genus it is impossible to arrive at an unqualifiedly maximum or minimum. There is **no fixed center**. And as there is no fixed center there is **no circumference**. Applying the coincidence of opposites Cusanus claims that **the center of the world coincides with its circumference**. That center is God. This leads to a **denial of the central position of the earth**. That central position is shown to be **no more than a perspectival illusion**. The unboundedness of the universe causes every attempt to locate its center to suffer shipwreck. In reality there are **no fixed poles**, although **we presuppose such fixed reference poles** whenever we measure motion.

There is, to be sure, a strand in Cusanus' discussion that ascribes to the earth a lesser motion than to the other planets, which would make his a modified geocentric position. But this modified geocentrism seems finally incompatible with his understanding of the universe as having its center and circumference in God. Or is there, after all, a need to hold on to it?

Chapter Twelve begins with a thought experiment designed to unmask geocentrism as a perspectival illusion. In this connection I pointed out the significance of Cusanus' rejection of cosmic **heterogeneity**. It is indeed a corollary of his understanding of creation. In its place we find a presumption of **cosmic homogeneity**. This leads in turn to an elevation of the earth to the level of the stars. Cusanus is concerned to make sun and earth a much alike as possible. Especially provocative and influential proved to be the suggestion that other stars, too, must have their inhabitants.

Much of **Chapter Thirteen** is taken up by quite traditional praise of the wisdom of God's creation. God is said to have used arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music, the same arts that we use when we investigate things and teach in the quadrivium. Again

there is tension in this claim? Are we not understanding God here in the image of man? But was not man created in God's image? Although Cusanus asserts that God arranged everything in an admirable order, we cannot really understand that order. We cannot understand the ways of the creator.

With this let us turn to the **Third Book**:

2

The prologue once again is addressed to cardinal Cesarini. The concept of Jesus, which Cusanus proposes to put forth in this book, is easy enough to grasp, if impossible to fully understand: for Jesus is said to be both **Absolute maximum** and **contracted maximum**. But what sense does the latter make? The problem is similar to that of thinking the maximum number. Cusanus' main reason for introducing this concept would appear to be his inherited faith. The question that faces the philosopher is: what, if any, philosophical reason is there for introducing this concept? Could the third book be deleted without a serious loss of philosophical substance?⁴⁵ But let us turn to the first chapter:

Chapter One: A maximum which is contracted to this or that and than which there cannot be a greater cannot exist apart from the Absolute [Maximum]

The chapter begins by recalling the preceding discussion:

Book One shows that the one absolutely Maximum — which is incommunicable, unfathomable, incontractible to this or that — exists in itself as eternally, equally, and unchangeably the same. Book Two thereafter exhibits the contraction of the universe, for the universe exists only as contractedly this and that. Thus, the Oneness of the Maximum exists absolutely in itself; the oneness of the universe exists contractedly in plurality. (125; 182)

Interesting is the insistence that within a given species there is no absolute maximum or minimum.

Therefore, with regard to contracted things, there cannot be an ascent or a descent to an absolutely maximum or an absolutely minimum. Hence, just as the Divine Nature, which is absolutely maximal, cannot be diminished so that it becomes finite and contracted, so neither can the contracted nature become diminished in contraction to the point that it becomes altogether absolute [i.e., altogether free of contraction. (126; 183)

Think of red. There is no last shade of red before it trails off into orange: Therefore, it is not the case that any contracted thing attains to the limit either of the universe or of genus or of species; for there can exist a less greatly contracted thing or a more greatly contracted thing [than it]. (126; 184)

The only limit is God:

Therefore, no [individual thing] reaches the limit of its species.

Therefore, there is only one Limit of species, of genera, or of the universe. This Limit is the Center, the Circumference, and the Union of all things. (126; 184-185)

Important is the assertion of **continuity**. The assertion implies also limits to human understanding.

Accordingly, among genera, which contract the one universe, there is such a union of a lower [genus] and a higher [genus] that the two coincide in a third [genus] in between. And among the different species there is such an order of combination that the highest species of the one genus coincides with the lowest [species] of the immediately higher [genus], so that there is one continuous and perfect universe. (126; 185-186)

According to Cusanus, there cannot be any sharp boundaries that separate species. And he thinks himself supported in this claim by the natural philosophers, beginning with Aristotle:

Therefore, the different species of a lower and a higher genus are not united in something indivisible which does not admit of greater and lesser degree; rather, [they are united] in a third species, whose individuals differ

⁴⁵ Hans Blumenberg, in his edition of a selection of the works of Cusanus, Nicolaus von Cues. *Die Kunst der Vwermutung, Auswahl aus den Schriften* (Bremen: Carl

by degrees, so that no one [of them] participates equally in both [the higher and the lower species], as if this individual were a composite of these [two species]. Instead, [the individual of the third species] contracts, in its own degree, the one nature of its own species. As related to the other species this [third] species is seen to be composed of the lower and of the higher [species], though not equally, since no thing can be composed of precise equals; and this third species, which falls between the other two, necessarily has a preponderant conformity to one of them — i.e., to the higher or to the lower. In the books of the philosophers examples of this are found with regard to oysters, sea mussels, and other things. (127; 186)

Cusanus does not hesitate to extend this point to human beings:

Therefore, no species descends to the point that it is the minimum species of some genus, for before it reaches the minimum it is changed into another species; and a similar thing holds true of the [would-be] maximum species, which is changed into another species before it becomes a maximum species. When in the genus animal the human species endeavors to reach a higher gradation among perceptible things, it is caught up into a mingling with the intellectual nature; nevertheless, the lower part, in accordance with which man is called an animal, prevails. Now, presumably, there are other spirits. ([I will discuss] these in *Conjectures*). And because of a certain nature which is capable of perception they are said, in an extended sense, to be of the genus animal. But since the intellectual nature in them prevails over the other nature, they are called spirits rather than animals, although the Platonists believe that they are intellectual animals. Accordingly, it is evident that species are like a number series which progresses sequentially and which, necessarily, is finite, so that there is order, harmony, and proportion in diversity, as I indicated in Book One. (127: 187)

Schünemann Verlag, 1957) includes only the first four chapters of Book III.

Cusanus is placing the human species between the higher animals and more totally spiritual beings. Chalcidius, e.g. speaks in his commentary of the *Timaeus* of demons which are there said to be of the genus animals.⁴⁶ That may well be a source for Cusanus.

But what does he mean when he likens species to number series? Cusanus refers the reader back to Book One, where he had pointed out in chapter 5 that the number series is finite in that every number has a definite value. It is a set of a definite number of members. We can speak of species in analogous fashion.

It is necessary that, without proceeding to infinity, we reach (1) the lowest species of the lowest genus, than which there is not actually a lesser, and (2) the highest [species] of the highest [genus], than which, likewise, there is not actually a greater and higher — even though a lesser than the former and a greater than the latter could be respectively posited. Thus, whether we number upwards or downwards we take our beginning from Absolute Oneness (which is God) — i.e., from the Beginning of all things. Hence, species are as numbers that come together from two opposite directions — [numbers] that proceed from a minimum which is maximum and from a maximum to which a minimum is not opposed. Hence, there is nothing in the universe which does not enjoy a certain singularity that cannot be found in any other thing, so that no thing excels all others in all respects or [excels] different things in equal measure. By comparison, there can never in any respect be something equal to another (127; 188)

Every entity is unique, in this sense incomparable to any other. From these general principles Cusanus arrives at a **principle of toleration**.

Individuating principles cannot come together in one individual in such harmonious comparative relation as in another [individual]; thus, through itself each thing is one and is perfect in the way it can be. And in each species — e.g., the human species — we find that at a given time some individuals are more perfect and more excellent than others in certain respects. (For example, Solomon excelled others in wisdom, Absalom in beauty, Sampson in strength; and those who excelled others more with regard to the intellective part deserved to be honored above the

⁴⁶ PTW I, p. 104.

others.) Nevertheless, a difference of opinions — in accordance with the difference of religions, sects, and regions — gives rise to different judgments of comparison (so that what is praiseworthy according to one [religion, sect, or region] is reprehensible according to another); and scattered throughout the world are people unknown to us. Hence, we do not know who is more excellent than the others in the world; for of all [individuals] we cannot know even one perfectly. God produced this state of affairs in order that each individual, although admiring the others, would be content with himself, with his native land (so that his birthplace alone would seem most pleasant to him), with the customs of his domain, with his language, and so on, so that to the extent possible there would be unity and peace, without envy. For there can be [peace] in every respect only for those who reign with God, who is our peace which surpasses all understanding (128; 189).

3

Chapter Two: The maximum contracted [to a species] is also the Absolute Maximum; it is both] Creator and creature.

Only with this chapter do we really get to the central concern of this third book, to the Christology of Cusanus. The aim is to show that there is indeed a being that is both creature and creator, both man and God, where the and must be understood not additively, but in terms of the coincidence of opposites, and that is to say, as surpassing the reach of our reason.

Cusanus begins by noting that we are unable to conceive an actual maximum for any given species, genus, or even a maximum genus, where we should keep in mind that for Cusanus general and species, like all universals, have no actual existence and yet their creation by our intellect responds to an order that we perceive in things. But besides God, only individuals have actual being.

Cusanus now asks: what if there were, despite all that has been said, an actually contracted individual of some species? That individual that would provide all the other members of the species with a measure. The question that we must feel tempted to raise is, why engage in such thought experiments? Think of some species: say "rose".

It is easy to see why we would want to posit such a species in the first place. It is part of our making sense of the world. We need to establish a certain order in comprehended nature. Think now of particular roses. Some strike us as better examples than others. How are they related to our concept "rose"? Is there a perfect rose? An ideal rose? The ideal would bring with it something like the idea of a **measure** that lets us judge other roses more or less perfect.

It is thoroughly clear that the universe is only contractedly-many-things; these are actually such that no one of them attains to the unqualifiedly Maximum. I will add something more: if a maximum which is contracted to a species could be posited as actually existing, then, in accordance with the given species of contraction, this maximum would be actually all the things which are able to be in the possibility of that genus or species. And just as the [Absolute] Minimum coincides with the Absolute Maximum, so also the contractedly minimum coincides with the contracted maximum.

A very clear illustration of this [truth] occurs with regard to a maximum line, which admits of no opposition, and which is both every figure and the equal measure of all figures, and with which a point coincides—as I showed in Book One. (128; 190-191)

Such a maximum would have to be both God and creature:

And herefrom it is evident — in conformity with the points I exhibited a bit earlier — that the contracted maximum [individual] cannot exist as purely contracted. For no such [purely contracted thing] could attain the fullness of perfection in the genus of its contraction. Nor would such a thing qua contracted be God, who is most absolute. But, necessarily, the contracted maximum [individual] — i.e., God and creature — would be both absolute and contracted, by virtue of a contraction which would be able to exist in itself. (129; 192)

That such a union must surpass our understanding requires no comment:

Who, then, could conceive of so admirable a union, which is not as [the union] of form to matter, since the Absolute God cannot be commingled with matter and does not inform [it]. Assuredly, this [union] would be greater than all intelligible unions; for what is contracted would (since it is maximum) exist there only in Absolute Maximality — neither adding anything to Maximality (since Maximality is absolute) nor passing over into its nature (since it itself is contracted). (130; 194) For such a [being] would have to be conceived by us as (1) in such way God that it is also a creature, (2) in such way a creature that it is also Creator, and (3) Creator and creature without confusion and without composition. Who, then, could be lifted to such a height that in oneness he would conceive diversity and in diversity oneness? Therefore, this union would transcend all understanding. (130; 194)

Having gone this far Cusanus proceeds to ask: of what nature would such a twofold maximum be. The answer is to be expected:

4

Chapter Three: Only in the case of the nature of humanity can there be such a maximum [individual]

This argument invites comparison with Kant's argument that only the human being permits us to speak of an ideal of beauty.

An ideal of beautiful flowers, of beautiful furnishings, or of a beautiful view is unthinkable. But an ideal of beauty that is accessory to determinate purposes is also inconceivable, e. g., an ideal of a beautiful mansion, a beautiful tree, a beautiful garden, etc., presumably because the purposes are not sufficiently determined and fixed by their concept, so that the purposiveness is nearly as free as in the case of vague beauty. [This leaves] only that which has the purposes of its existence with itself — man. Man can himself determine his purposes by reason; or, where he has to take them from outer perception, he can still compare them with essential and universal purposes and then judge the former purposes' harmony with the latter ones aesthetically as well. It is man, alone among all objects in the world, who admits of an ideal of beauty, just as the humanity in his

person, [i.e. in man considered as an intelligence, is the only [thing] in the world that admits of the ideal of perfection.⁴⁷ (par. 17; 80-81)

Kant presupposes that moral self-determination can appear in a person and be represented by an artist. The gulf that separates noumenon and phenomenon would appear to be bridged here.

Important here is the distinction between the standard or normal idea and the rational idea of a human being. Human beauty, or the beauty of a horse, or that of a building presupposes, Kant insists, some concept of the kind of thing we are judging. In judging a horse beautiful we inevitably refer it to the normal idea of a horse. The ability to arrive at such normal ideas is a remarkable if incomprehensible power of the judgment:

But this [ideal of beauty] has two components. The first is the aesthetic standard idea, which is an individual intuition (of the imagination) [by] which [we] present the standard for judging man as a thing belonging to a particular animal species. The second is the rational idea, which makes the purposes of humanity, insofar as they cannot be presented in sensibility, the principle, for judging his figure, which reveals these purposes, as their effect in appearance. (par.17; 81)

The passage deserves careful consideration. First of all, Kant invites us to understand the imagination here very much as an *analogon rationis*. We intuit the standard idea that is a presupposition of recognizing some thing as a man by means of the imagination. Difficult to understand is the claim that while the rational idea "cannot be presented in sensibility," we can recognize "their [referring to the purposes of humanity] effect in appearance." How are we to think such recognition?

The ideal of beauty presupposes then not only the standard idea of a human being, but also a rational idea: the idea of the human being as a rational being, provided by the conception we have of ourselves as moral agents.

But from the standard idea of the beautiful we must still distinguish the ideal of the beautiful, which for reasons already stated must be expected solely in the human figure. Now the ideal in this figure consists in the expression of the moral; apart from the moral the object would not be

⁴⁷ Page references are to Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987).

liked universally and moreover positively (rather than merely negatively, when it is exhibited in a way that is [merely] academically correct). Now it is true that this visible expression of moral ideas that govern man inwardly can be taken only from experience. Yet these moral ideas must be connected, in the highest purposiveness, with everything that our reason links with the morally good: goodness of soul, or purity, or fortitude, or serenity, etc.; and in order for this connection to be made visible, as it were, in bodily expression (as an effect of what is inward), pure ideas of reason must be united with a very strong imagination in someone who seeks so much as to judge, let alone exhibit, it. (par.17; 83/84)

Kant here presupposes that we experience certain phenomena as the visible expression of moral ideas. This is to say that there must be experiences that bridge the divide between phenomena and things in themselves. Art that succeeds in exhibiting the ideal establishes such a bridge.

Cusanus understanding of Christ has a similar bridging function, where we should keep in mind that medieval thinkers thought of beauty in these terms and of Christ as the ideal of beauty. Here a passage by St. Augustine who is commenting on Psalm 45:

He then is beautiful in heaven, beautiful on earth; beautiful in the womb, beautiful in his parents' arms; beautiful in his miracles; beautiful under the scourge; beautiful when inviting to life ... beautiful in laying down his life; beautiful in taking it up again; beautiful on the cross; beautiful in the sepulchre; beautiful in heaven.⁴⁸

Cusanus is indebted to this tradition.

5

To establish that a human being alone is the proper vehicle for the coincidence of Creator and creature Cusanus appeals to the distinction between **higher and lower**. We may want to ask whether this distinction has not been called into question by his cosmology with its claim of cosmic homogeneity. What is clear is that the argument of

⁴⁸ St. Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 44. 3, cited in Gerald O'Collins, "The Beauty of Christ," 2005, www.theway.org.uk/back/444OCollins.pdf

Book Three depends crucially on a reassertion of that distinction. In a way that anticipates Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486) Cusanus asserts that the special dignity of man, which makes the human being the only proper proper vehicle for the coincidence of Creator and creature, is tied to the way human beings occupy the middle position in the hierarchy of creatures.

it is first of all evident that the order of things necessarily requires that some things be of a lower nature in comparison with others (as natures devoid of life and intelligence are), that some things be of a higher nature (viz., intelligences), and that some things be of an in-between [nature]. Therefore, if Absolute Maximality is in the most universal way the Being of all things, so that it is not more of one thing than of another: clearly, that being which is more common to the totality of beings is more unitable with the [Absolute] Maximum. (130; 195)

Cusanus goes on to offer an argument why a line could not serve this function;

Now, if the nature of lower things is considered and if one of these lower beings were elevated unto [Absolute] Maximality, such a being would be both God and itself. An example is furnished with regard to a maximum line. Since the maximum line would be infinite through Absolute Infinity and maximal through [Absolute] Maximality (to which, necessarily, it is united if it is maximal): through [Absolute] Maximality it would be God and through contraction it would remain a line. And so, it would be, actually, everything which a line can become. But a line does not include [the possibility of] life or intellect. Therefore, if the line would not attain to the fullness of [all] natures, how could it be elevated to the maximum gradation? For it would be a maximum which could be greater and which would lack [some] perfections. 130-131: 196)

Nor could a spiritual being much above us, such as an angel:

Therefore, a middle nature, which is the means of the union of the lower [nature] and the higher [nature], is alone that [nature] which can be suitably elevated unto the Maximum by the power of the maximal, infinite God. For since this middle nature — as being what is highest of the lower [nature] and what is lowest of the higher [nature] — enfolds within itself all natures: if it ascends wholly to a union with Maximality, then — as is evident — all natures and the entire universe have, in this nature, wholly reached the supreme gradation. (131; 197)

The only plausible candidate is human being. It is possible to speak of Cusanus' **anthropocentrism**. Note that geocentrism and anthropocentrism do not here go together. Nor do they go together in Copernicus or in the new science.

Human being provides the measure of all beings. But the ideal human being is of course Christ. Cusanus has thus prepared the conceptual place for Christ in his system:

Now, human nature is that [nature] which, though created a little lower than the angels, is elevated above all the [other] works of God; it enfolds intellectual and sensible nature and encloses all things within itself, so that the ancients were right in calling it a microcosm, or a small world. (131; 197)

And [we ought not to believe] that the Firstborn—viz., God and man—preceded the world temporally but [should believe that He preceded it] in nature and in the order of perfection and above all time. Hence, by existing with God above time and prior to all things, He could appear to the world in the fullness of time (in *plentitudine temporis*), after many cycles had passed. (133; 202)

How are we to understand **the fullness of time**? The reference is to Paul's Letters to the Galatians (4:4):

But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son. and to the Ephesians (1:9-10):

For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Clear is that with this notion of a fullness of time, time is no longer understood as an endless sequence of nows. Time now acquires something like a center, as also does space.

Chapter Four: Blessed Jesus, who is God and man, is the [contracted maximum individual].

Cusanus reminds us that faith guided these considerations. With Chapter Four faith takes over.

Not surprisingly Cusanus identifies the contracted maximum individual with Jesus:

In sure faith and by such considerations as the foregoing, we have now been led to the place that without any hesitancy at all we firmly hold the aforesaid to be most true. Accordingly, I say by way of addition that the fullness of time *(temporis plentitudo)* has passed and that ever-blessed Jesus is the Firstborn of all creation.

On the basis of what Jesus, who was a man, divinely and suprahumanly wrought and on the basis of other things which He, who is found to be true in all respects, affirmed about Himself — [things to which] those who lived with Him bore witness with their own blood and with an unalterable steadfastness that was formerly attested to by countless infallible considerations — we justifiably assert that Jesus is the one (1) whom the whole creation, from the beginning, expected to appear at the appointed time and (2) who through the prophets had foretold that He would appear in the world. For He came "in order to fill all things," because He willingly restored all [human beings] to health. (133; 203)

Once again Cusanus invites the idea of the fullness of time. Is it the time when time and eternity coincide? Important is the following passage:

In Him the humanity was united to the Word of God, so that the humanity existed not in itself but in the Word; for the humanity could not have existed in the supreme degree and in complete fullness otherwise than in the divine person of the Son. (134; 204)

The Word is the creative logos. Having its measure in Christ as the maximum of the human species, nature by the same stroke is established as knowable. To give us some understanding of how Jesus is subsumed in the divinity Cusanus invites us to think it in analogy to the way our perceptual, embodied being is subsumed in our intellectual nature. Note the focus on the problem of **knowledge**; also on the problem of **incarnation**.

For since the intellect of Jesus is most perfect and exists in complete actuality, it can be personally subsumed only in the divine intellect, which alone is actually all things. For in all human beings the [respective] intellect is potentially all things; it gradually progresses from potentiality to actuality, so that the greater it [actually] is, the lesser it is in potentiality. But the maximum intellect, since it is the limit of the potentiality of every intellectual nature and exists in complete actuality, cannot at all exist without being intellect in such way that it is also God, who is all in all. By way of illustration: Assume that a polygon inscribed in a circle were the human nature and the circle were the divine nature. Then, if the polygon were to be a maximum polygon, than which there cannot be a greater polygon, it would exist not through itself with finite angles but in the circular shape. Thus, it would not have its own shape for existing — [i.e., it would not have a shape which was] even conceivably separable from the circular and eternal shape. (135; 206)

The example of the polygon inscribed in the circle is used to clarify the point. It applies also to understanding anything, say, a rose. A totally adequate understanding of the rose would be nothing other than the rose. Knowledge and being would here coincide.⁴⁹

A brief reflection on the body of Christ concludes the chapter.

Now, the maximality of human nature's perfection is seen in what is substantial and essential [about it] — i.e., with respect to the intellect, which is served by human nature's corporeal features. Hence, the maximally perfect man is not supposed to be prominent with regard to accidental features but with regard to His intellect. For example, it is not required that He be a giant or a dwarf or [that He be] of this or that size, color, figure — and so on for other accidents. Rather, it is necessary only that His body so avoid the extremes that it be a most suitable instrument for His intellectual nature, to which it be obedient and submissive without recalcitrance, complaint, and fatigue. Our Jesus — in whom were hidden (even while He appeared in the world) all the treasures of knowledge and wisdom, as if a light were hidden in darkness — is believed to have had,

⁴⁹ Cf. Cusanus, *De li non aliud*.
for the sake of His most excellent intellectual nature, a most suitable and most perfect body (as also is reported by the most holy witnesses of His life). (207)

Jesus thus also provides us with the ideal of beauty. There is no obvious Scriptural support for such an idealization. But there is an affinity with Renaissances humanism — think of Leonardo or Michelangelo. The human body with its proportions provides the visual arts with its measure.

11. Is There a Measure on Earth?

1

Last time we began our discussion of the third book. I suggested that what Cusanus calls the concept of Jesus is in one sense easy enough to grasp, if difficult to really understand: Jesus is said to be both **Absolute maximum** and **contracted maximum**, God and the perfection of human being. The difficulty is of course that just such a contracted maximum appears to be ruled out by Cusanus' understanding of creation, which always allows for a greater and a less. Why introduce such a concept at all?

What is at issue here is the **decentering power of the thought of God as infinite**, which makes him both infinitely distant and infinitely close to every point of creation, as expressed by the metaphor of the **infinite sphere**. But so understood God does not provide humanity with a measure, and yet freedom needs such a measure if it is not to degenerate into arbitrariness — Kant might have said, if *Wille* is not to degenerate into *Willkür*.

What then binds freedom and renders it responsible? Is there a measure on earth? A familiar, if questionable, etymology, ties the word religion to the verb *religare*, from *ligare* to bind. *Religare* means to bind securely, to moor as one moors a boat. Religion would bind freedom and thus render it responsible. But to bind us God must in some sense appear to us. A Christian might insist that God has indeed appeared to us: in nature, in Scripture, and most importantly in the person Jesus.

We concluded thus our last session with a discussion of **Chapter Four: Blessed** Jesus, who is God and man, is the [contracted maximum individual], where Cusanus reminds us that faith guided his considerations. Having become learned about our ignorance we recognize the importance of faith.

> In sure faith and by such considerations as the foregoing, we have now been led to the place that without any hesitancy at all we firmly hold the aforesaid to be most true. Accordingly, I say by way of addition that the fullness of time *(temporis plentitudo)* has passed and that ever-blessed Jesus is the Firstborn of all creation.

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On the basis of what Jesus, who was a man, divinely and suprahumanly wrought and on the basis of other things which He, who is found to be true in all respects, affirmed about Himself — [things to which] those who lived with Him bore witness with their own blood and with an unalterable steadfastness that was formerly attested to by countless infallible considerations — we justifiably assert that Jesus is the one (1) whom the whole creation, from the beginning, expected to appear at the appointed time and (2) who through the prophets had foretold that He would appear in the world. For He came "in order to fill all things," because He willingly restored all [human beings] to health. Being powerful over all things. (133; 203)

In Jesus **humanity was united to the Word of God**. The Word is the creative logos. Having its measure in Christ as the maximum of the human species, nature by the same stroke is established as knowable. The confidence of the scientist, too, rests on a faith in the commensurabity of human reason and the order of nature, faith in a transcendent logos that provides our human logos with its measure.

A brief reflection on the body of Christ concludes the chapter. I would like to return to it once more:

Now, the maximality of human nature's perfection is seen in what is substantial and essential [about it] — i.e., with respect to the intellect, which is served by human nature's corporeal features. Hence, the maximally perfect man is not supposed to be prominent with regard to accidental features but with regard to His intellect. For example, it is not required that He be a giant or a dwarf or [that He be] of this or that size, color, figure — and so on for other accidents. Rather, it is necessary only that His body so avoid the extremes that it be a most suitable instrument for His intellectual nature, to which it be obedient and submissive without recalcitrance, complaint, and fatigue. Our Jesus — in whom were hidden (even while He appeared in the world) all the treasures of knowledge and wisdom, as if a light were hidden in darkness — is believed to have had, for the sake of His most excellent intellectual nature, a most suitable and most perfect body (as also is reported by the most holy witnesses of His life). (135; 207)

Jesus thus provides us with the ideal of beauty. There is no obvious Scriptural support for such an idealization. But there is an affinity with Renaissances humanism —think of Leonardo or Michelangelo. The perfect human body with its proportions provides the visual arts with its measure just as the life of Jesus provides our life with its measure. To function as a measure the Word had to be incarnated. The experience of this incarnation is an experience of beauty. But let me develop this point further.

2

Religion I suggested would bind freedom. But so understood religion has been threatened again and again from within by the anarchy threatened by the infinity of God, which blurs with the infinity we bear within ourselves, that is with our freedom. In our very first session I called attention to the connection between insistence on the infinity of God and human self-assertion, the turn to man as the only available measure, between Eckhartian mysticism and Renaissance humanism. In that connection I called attention to the remarkable fact that we find both Alberti and Cusanus' concerned to rehabilitate the much-maligned **Protagoras**.

Let me cite once more Alberti: "Since man is the thing best known to man, perhaps Protagoras, by saying that man is the mode and measure of all things, meant that all the accidents of things are known through comparison to the accidents of man."⁵⁰ We meet with a similar reference in his *Libri della famiglia*, dating from roughly the same time. In this rehabilitation of the sophist, which challenges both Plato and Aristotle, humanistic self-assertion in the face of the decentering threatened by meditations on infinity finds striking expression.

As I pointed out, we find the same rehabilitation of Protagoras in Cusanus, who explicitly defends the sophist against the critique of Aristotle in *De Beryllo*, which appeared in 1458. Did Cusanus here borrow from the younger Alberti?⁵¹ I suspect that

⁵⁰ Alberti, p. 55.

⁵¹ It is worth noting that both in places wrote Pythagoras, where they should have written Protagoras, where Cusanus may have been misled by a copy of Bessarion's translation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* that he owned, although in a marginal note he points out the confusion. But should we consider this a mere confusion? As we shall see, Cusanus's

Cusanus had read *On Painting* when he began work on *On Learned Ignorance*. Be this as it may, Cusanus' meditations on infinity have to lead, as we have seen, to a denial of any absolute center or measure in the realm of creatures. This loss in turn generates the demand for a new center, a new measure. The de-centering that is a consequence of thoughts of the infinity of God invites a humanist re-centering. Cusanus invites us to understand the anthropocentrism of the Renaissance as a response to the de-centering power of reflection on the infinity of God. The rehabilitation of Protagoras belongs in this context. Not that such rehabilitation can have been based on much more than what was suggested by the much quoted line that man is the measure of all things. Neither Plato's *Protagoras*, nor his *Theaetetus* were then available. For Alberti's purposes, that one line was all he needed.

There are striking similarities between the way Alberti and Cusanus appeal to Protagoras. Here once more Cusanus in *De Beryllo*:

Thirdly, note the saying of Protagoras that man is the measure of things.⁵² With the sense man measures perceptible things, with the intellect he measures intelligible things, and he attains unto supra-intelligible things transcendently. Man does this measuring in accordance with the aforementioned [cognitive modes]. For then he knows that the cognizing soul is the goal of things knowable, he knows on the basis of the perceptive power that perceptible things are supposed to be such as can be perceived. And likewise [he knows] regarding intelligible things that [they are supposed to be such] as can be understood, and [he knows] that transcendent things [are to be such] as can transcend. Hence, man finds in himself, as in a measuring scale, all created things.⁵³

understanding of mathematics invites a blurring of the distinction between Pythagoras and Protagoras. See the following note.

⁵² Cusanus had written "Pytagorae." This was corrected in the critical edition by Ludwig Baur with the interesting comment: "Nicolaus scripsit Pytagorae. Hunc errorem inde repetendum esse puto, quod in codice Cusano 184 fol. 71 r in translatione Metaphysicae a Bessarione redacta legitur: 'Pytagoras omnium rerum hominem mensuram aiebat"; sed in codice additur; "Credo dici debere Protagoras." Quoted in Santinello, Alberti, p. 287, n. 44.

⁵³ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Beryllo, Opera Omnia*, vol. XI, ed. Hans G. Sänger and Karl Bormann (Hamburg: Meiner, 1988), p. 6; trans. Jasper Hopkins, *On [Intellectual]*

To the extent that we can know things at all, they must be capable of entering our consciousness, either as objects of sense, or as objects of thought, or as mysteries that transcend the power of reason. Just as the painter's representation of the world has its center in the perceiving eye, the world as we know it has its center in the knowing subject. And if this suggestion that the human being is the center of things known ascribes a quasi-divine creativity to man, this should not seem too surprising, given that according to the Biblical tradition God created man in his own image.

Cusanus understands this image character first of all in terms of man's ability to create a second world, the world of concepts, which allows us to measure what we experience. Rather like Alberti's perspective construction, this second world provides the linguistic or logical space in which what we perceive has to take its place if it is to be understood at all. Cusanus therefore continues:

Fourthly, note that Hermes Trismegistus states that man is a second god. For just as God is the creator of all real beings and of natural forms, so man is the creator of conceptual beings and of artificial forms that are only likenesses in his intellect, even as God's creatures are likenesses of the Divine intellect.⁵⁴

Like Alberti, Cusanus insists here on the godlike character of man. As God's creative reason unfolds itself in creation, so the human intellect unfolds itself in whatever it knows. The known world resembles the world created by Alberti's painter.

Later in De Beryllo Cusanus returns to Protagoras:

There still remains one thing: viz., to see how it is that man is the measure of all things. Aristotle says that by means of this [expression] Protagoras stated nothing profound. Nevertheless, Protagoras seems to me to have expressed [herein] especially important [truths]. I consider Aristotle rightly to have stated, at the outset of his *Metaphysics*, that all men by nature desire to know. He makes this statement with regard to the sense of sight, which a man possesses not simply for the sake of working; rather, we love sight because sight manifests to us many differences. If, then, man has senses and reason not only in order to know, then perceptible

Eyeglasses, Nicholas of Cusa: Metaphysical Speculations (Minneapolis: Banning, 1997), p. 37.

objects have to nourish man for two purposes: viz., in order that he may live and in order that he may know. But knowing is more excellent and more noble, because it has the higher and more incorruptible goal. Earlier on, we presupposed that the Divine Intellect created all things in order to manifest itself; likewise the Apostle Paul, writing to the Romans, says that the invisible God is known in and through the visible things of the world.⁵⁵

This, to be sure, hardly sounds like a critique of Aristotle. Quite the opposite: Cusanus sounds like a humanist Aristotelian when he here, and not only here, embraces the visible things of the world in all their variety as an epiphany of the Divine. [Trinkaus is right to link this passage to Alberti's invocation of *la più grassa Minerva* to suggest a new emphasis on visible form.⁵⁶] But what impresses Cusanus here is not just the beauty and wealth of the visible, but the way all we see is dependent on the fact that we possess eves: Aristotle is said to have seen "this very point: viz., that if perceptual cognition is removed, perceptible objects are removed. For he says in the *Metaphysics*: 'If there were not things that are enlivened, there would not be either senses or perceptible objects."⁵⁷ And the same holds for the objects of our knowledge. Is Protagoras then not right when he "stated that man is the measure of things"? "Because man knows — by reference to the nature of his perceptual [cognition] — that perceptual objects exist for the sake of that cognition, he measures perceptible objects in order to apprehend, perceptually, the glory of the Divine Intellect."⁵⁸ The being of whatever presents itself is a being relative to the human perceiver and knower. Cusanus charges Aristotle with having failed to pay sufficient attention to such relativity and as a consequence to have failed to do justice to Protagoras.

⁵⁴ De Beryllo, p. 7; trans. p. 37.

⁵⁵ De Beryllo, p. 65; trans. p. 68

⁵⁶ Charles Trinkaus, "Protagoras in the Renaissance: An Exploration," in *Philosophy and Humanism: Essays in Honor of Paul Oskar Kristeller*, ed. Edmund Mahoney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), p. 203. On the phrase, *la più grassa Minerva*, see John R. Spencer's introduction to his translation of Alberti's *On Painting*, pp. 18-19. ⁵⁷ *De Bervllo*, p. 69; trans. p. 70.

⁵⁸ *De Beryllo*, p. 69; trans. p. 70.

3

Consider once more Aristotle's critique of Protagoras, where that very critique may have encouraged humanists who had come to associate the Stagirite with the scholasticism they rejected to give the maligned sophist a kinder reception.⁵⁹

Knowledge, also, and perception, we call the measure of things, for the same reason, because we come to know something by them — while as a matter of fact they are measured rather than measure other things. But it is with us as if someone else measured us and we came to know how big we are by seeing that he applied the cubit-measure a certain number of times to us. But Protagoras says man is the measure of all things, meaning really the man who knows or the man who perceives, and these because they have respectively knowledge and perception, which we say are the measures of objects. They are saying nothing, then, while they appear to be saying something remarkable.⁶⁰

Aristotle insists that more fundamentally our knowledge of things has its measure in these things. They are, as it were, the natural measures of knowledge. It is as if we were handed a yardstick and decided by that how tall we were.

For Cusanus, too, our knowledge begins with perception. But perception does not give us an unmediated access to God's creation. Even the yardstick example invites more questions than may at first appear. Does our understanding of the length of a "yard" not presuppose an understanding of its relationship to our body? That relationship becomes explicit when we say: "a yard is three feet." Perception already imposes a human measure on whatever presents itself to our senses. And this dependence on the subject is compounded by the way perception is entangled in understanding. To be sure, when I call this an oak-tree, the proposition's truth or falsity would seem to be decided by whether this tree is indeed an oak-tree. Cusanus, however, might ask whether, when I see this object as an oak-tree, such seeing is not itself dependent on the humanly created concept "oak-tree," as it is dependent on the make-up of our eyes. From the very beginning we have subjected appearance to our human measures.

⁵⁹ Cf. Trinkaus, p. 193.

⁶⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, X, 1, 1053a31-1053b4. Trans. W. D. Ross.

One could, to be sure, challenge Protagoras by invoking Cusanus' own doctrine of learned ignorance. There is, indeed, as Aristotle recognized, a sense in which knowledge and perception must be said to measure things. But do we not lose the distinction between appearance and reality when we make man the measure of all things? Was Cusanus' teaching of learned ignorance not meant to block precisely such an undue self-elevation of the human knower by reminding us that the final measure of all human knowing is God? Consider Plato's remark on Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*, a remark Cusanus is unlikely to have known, since Ficino finished his translation of that dialogue only some years later: "He says, you will remember, that 'man is the measure of all things — alike of the being of things that are and of the not-being of things that are not." ... He puts it in this sort of way, doesn't he, that any given thing 'is to me such as it appears to me, and is to you as it appears to you,' you and I being men?"⁶¹ Plato already accuses Protagoras of confusing appearance and reality; or, of confusing perceiving and knowing.

But for Cusanus the seeming obviousness of this distinction is rendered questionable by a higher-order reflection: does the knower, too, not impose on what he claims to know his human measures? It is precisely because of this that Cusanus, like Alberti, calls man a second God, a creator of conceptual forms in which he mirrors or unfolds himself and by means of which he reconstructs or recreates in his own image the manifold presented to his senses.

In his Idiota de Mente Cusanus thus has his layman conjecture "that mind [*mens*] takes its name from measuring [*mensurare*]."⁶² Elsewhere Cusanus appeals to Albertus Magnus who, relying on a false etymology, had tied the word *mens* (mind) to *metior* (to measure).⁶³ He could also have appealed to Thomas Aquinas.⁶⁴ But important here is not the etymology, but the view that the proper activity of the *mens* is *mensurare*. But if so, where does such measuring find the proper measures? According to Cusanus we find the

⁶¹ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 152a. Trans. F. M. Cornford.

 ⁶² Nicholas of Cusa, *Idiota de Mente*, I; trans. *The Layman on Mind* in Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge* (Minneapolis: Banning, 1996), p. 171.
 ⁶³ See Maurice de Gandillac, *Nikolaus von Kues, Studien zu seiner Philosophie und philosophischen Weltanschauung*, trans. Karl Fleischmann, vom Verfasser grundlegend überarbeitete Ausgabe (Düsseldorf: Schwan, 1953), p. 152. Gandillac refers to a sermon from 1455 (CLXVII, 509) where Cusanus appeals to Albertus Magnus, *De Anima*.

most fundamental measure within ourselves, where Cusanus is thinking first of all, not of the body, but of the mind itself. Plato already had understood thought as a process seeking unity.⁶⁵ Sight, as we saw, furnishes us only ever different aspects of things. What then are these things in truth? Demanded is an understanding of the being of the thing in question that would allow us to gather these perceived aspects into a unity. Quite in the spirit of Plato Cusanus, too, understands the human intellect as essentially in between that unity that draws it and the manifold of the world to which it is tied by the body and its senses and desires. This lived tension of the one and the many demands resolution. The human being demands unity and is yet prevented from seizing that unity by the manifold in which contradiction is always present. The manifold must therefore be brought under a unity. In its attempt to seize that unity, the intellect can succeed only to the degree to which it succeeds in applying this measure to the manifold.⁶⁶

The nature of this process is made more explicit in the very beginning of the first of the *Idiota* dialogues, *Idiota de Sapientia*⁶⁷ Having proclaimed, citing Scripture, that wisdom cries out in the streets, the layman points to the activities that take place in the marketplace. They see money-tellers, oil being measured, produce being weighed. In each case a unit measure is applied to what is to be measured. And can we not observe something of the sort wherever there is understanding? The activities observed on the marketplace invite the thought that just in so far as he is the being who measures, the human being transcends the beast. *Animal rationale* comes to be understood first of all as *animal mensurans*.

How then do we measure? The layman points out that we always measure by means of some unit, that is to say by means of the one. The paradigm of all knowing is thus counting, a thought familiar to both Aristotle and Aquinas.⁶⁸ But both, as we have

⁶⁴ See Gandillac, p. 152, who refers us to *De Veritate*, X, art. 1, In sent. I, 35, 1: "*Mens dicitur a metior, metiris*."

⁶⁵ Plato, *Republic VII*, 524E-525A

⁶⁶ Cf. Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1923), I, p.9.

⁶⁷ Nicholas of Cusa, *Idiota de Sapientia*; trans. *The Layman on Wisdom* in Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge* (Minneapolis: Banning, 1996).
⁶⁸ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*. X, 1, 1053b4: "Evidently then, being one in the strictest sense, if we define it according to the meaning of the word, is a measure, and especially of quantity, and secondly of quality." Also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 11, 2, in *The Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2 vols. ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York:

seen, insist that man is more fundamentally measured than measure. And something like that must be true if we are not to confuse reality and fiction and is indeed presupposed by Cusanus when he suggests that we seek to see and understand in order to better appreciate the glory of the Divine Intellect. As a Christian thinker, he never loses sight of the importance of the distinction between God's creative knowledge and human recreative knowledge. The human knower may indeed be likened to Alberti's painter, but we should not forget that this is a painter who paints creation in order to lead himself and others to a greater appreciation of the beauty of creation, which remains the ground of his re-creation.

All this implies that, as is indeed obvious, even if counting is constitutive of measuring the latter nevertheless cannot be reduced to the former: counting is not yet measuring. Thus if unity is indeed the primary measure, **that primary measure must be incarnated in some concrete unit measure if there are to be activities such as weighing flour or measuring the length of a piece of cloth**. And these concrete measures are not given to us by the human mind, they must be established by human beings in response to the world in which they live. The *braccio* that plays such an important part in Albert's perspective construction provides a good example. That measure, an arm's length, is read off the human body. In that sense it has its foundation in an already ordered nature. Not that a different unit of length might not have been chosen instead, which reminds us that such measures are indeed humanly created, but not ex nihilo. That just this measure is chosen has to do with the way the arm offers itself naturally when we measure cloth. Other activities might have suggested the foot or the digit of a finger as the appropriate measure.

And does something similar not hold for our words or concepts? They too are, to use one of Cusanus' favorite terms, conjectures, where Gandillac suggests that in the Latin Cusanus hears the German *Mut-massung* it translates, which suggests a measuring with the mind. We can call such conjectures human creations, provided that we keep in mind that, like *braccio* and "foot," they are not created *ex nihilo*, but in response to certain experiences of an already ordered reality.

Random House, 1945): "One implies the idea of a primary measure; and number is multitude measured by one."

We have no way of understanding God's creation as He understands it. Things are not available to us in their truth. **And yet that truth, the truth of things, measures our truth. But for that to be possible it must somehow present itself**. But how is such presentation to be thought? Can it be comprehended? As soon as there is experience there is also the interpreting activity of the human mind. Constitutive of whatever we experience is thus our way of understanding it, our human perspective. This Cusanus takes to be the profound insight of Protagoras. But if there is a sense in which the human mind can be called a living unity that unfolds itself in measure and number, such an unfolding must respond to a world it has not created if it is not to substitute arbitrary invention for understanding. The unfolding of the living unity that we ourselves are must at the same time be a loving return to the unity that illuminates the countless particulars that make up our world.

But this means that whatever presents itself to our senses must present itself as already illuminated by logos.⁶⁹ If the mind is to gather some perceived manifold into a unity, that manifold must present itself as inviting such a gathering. In his perspective construction Alberti turns to the body to furnish him with measures to mediate between the eye's point of view and what is to be represented. Cusanus similarly recognizes the need for measures to mediate between the mind, thought as an unfolding unity, and what is to be represented. Here, too, successful representation of the world in which we find ourselves requires that we furnish ourselves with measures that will allow us to take the measure of what is to be represented. But such measures must be fitting. To be such, the mind that creates these measures must do so in response to what it would measure. In what then do these measures have their ground? A Platonist could point to the forms, but Cusanus is too persuaded by the wisdom of Protagoras to be able to simply accept that suggestion. In *De Beryllo* Cusanus thus does not hesitate to criticize Plato's understanding of the forms:

> Know, too, that I have found, as it seems to me, a certain additional failing on the part of [those] seekers of truth. For Plato said (1) that a circle can be considered insofar as it is named or defined — insofar as it is mentally depicted or mentally conceived — and (2) that from these [considerations]

⁶⁹ *Timaeus*, 69b-c. See Elizabeth Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite: A Response to Blumenberg's Reading of Modernity*, dissertation, Yale University, 1995, pp. 113-114.

the nature of the circle is not known, but (3) that the circle's quiddity (which is simple and incorruptible and free of all contraries) is seen by the intellect alone. Indeed, Plato made similar statements regarding all [such things]."⁷⁰

Cusanus challenges the Platonic claim that we have an intellectual vision of mathematicals and of the other forms as independent realities. "For if Plato had considered that [claim], assuredly he would have found that our mind, which constructs mathematical entities, has these mathematical entities, which are in its power, more truly present with itself than as they exist outside the mind."⁷¹ Mathematics has its foundation in the unfolding of the human mind. "For example, man knows the mechanical art, and he has the forms of this art more truly in his mental concept than as they are formable outside his mind — just as a house, which is made by means of an art, has a truer form in the mind than in the pieces of wood. For the form that comes to characterize the wood is the mental form, idea, or exemplar."⁷² But unlike Plato, Cusanus sees no reason to reify the idea of the house and to give it an independent reality. Plato's forms, just like mathematicals, are understood as human creations. For Cusanus already, as later for Descartes, there is a sense, in which we understand things precisely only to the extent that we can make them.

That human beings, when looking for a form of representation that would do justice to the workings of their own mind, should have turned to mathematics is only to be expected. That holds especially for our attempts to understand the workings of nature. But we should remember that according to Cusanus the comparative transparency of such a mathematical representation of the world has its foundation in the chosen form of representation. This raises the question whether the other side of such transparency, as in the case of Alberti's perspective construction, is not the elision of the substance of reality which must escape such comprehension.

⁷⁰ *De Beryllo*, p. 55; trans. p. 62

⁷¹ *De Beryllo*, p. 55; trans. p. 62

⁷² *De Beryllo*, p. 55; trans. p. 62

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Cusanus would have us understand that the concepts embodied in our language are human creations. But he would also have us see that they may not be understood as creations *ex nihilo*. To give us insight into the world, our measures must respond to that very world in which and to which we apply them. But if so, experience may not be reduced to a mere perception of sensibilia. The fitting establishment of such measures requires an altogether different kind of perception, a perception that bears a certain resemblance to a perception of forms, even though Cusanus found what he took to be Plato's reification of the forms inadequate. But what sort of perception could that be, a perception that invites or calls for concepts and words that in turn are then applied to the perceived? The following remarks offer no more than a pointer that calls for further discussion.

In his *Idiota de Mente* Cusanus has his layman — that he is a craftsman is significant — offer the philosopher the example of a spoon to help the latter to a better understanding of the nature of mind.⁷³ Hollowing out the wood the layman shapes it, until finally the form of spoon-ness shines forth fittingly, *convenienter resplendeat*, that same form that in varying degrees shines forth (*relucet*) in all spoons. When the art of the craftsman succeeds in shaping the wood in such a way that the form shines forth fittingly, we call his work beautiful.

And does something similar not hold also of what is not a product of human work? In the sermon *Tota pulchra es, amica mea* of 1456⁷⁴ Cusanus, invoking the

⁷³ Nicolaus Cusanus, *Idiota de Mente*: trans. "The Layman on Mind," Jasper Hopkins, Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge (Minneapolis: Banning, 1959), p. 179. ⁷⁴ Giovanni Santinello, "Nicolai De Cusa: Tota pulchra es, amica mea (Sermo de pulchritudine). Introduzione ed ediz. critica," Atti e Memorie dell' Accademia Patavina," vol. LXXI, Padova, 1959, pp. 21-58. Page and line references in the text are to this edition. A French translation, "Sermon: Tu es toute belle, ma bien-aimée" appeared in Francis Bertin, Nicolas de Cues, Sermons Eckhartiens et Dionysiens, Introduction, traduction, notes et commentaires (Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 1998), pp. 317-385. Following Santinello, Bertin emphasizes how much of the sermon is made up of passages lifted from Ambrosius Traversari's translation of Dionysius's De divinis nominibus and from Albertus Magnus's commentary on that text. Toscanelli had brought the former to Cusanus in 1443, on behalf of Pope Nicholas V. See Nicolaus von Cues, Vom Nichtanderen, De Non Aliud, trans., intro. and notes by Paul Wilpert., p. 14, note 6. See also Giovanni Santinello, "Nicoló Cusano e Leon Battista Alberti: Pensieri sul bello e sull'arte." in Leon Battista Alberti: Una visione estetica del mondo e della vita (Firenze: Sansoni, 1962).

authority of Cicero as cited by Albertus Magnus, points out that we call the human body beautiful *ex resplendencia coloris super membra proportionata* (51, 5-6). *Proporcio* and *resplendencia* are taken to define the beautiful: *id quod materiale est in pulchritudine. puta proporcio, et formale puta resplendencia: primum quia unitas, secundum quia lux.* (56, 23-25). Proportion means unity, resplendence means a spiritual light. A beautiful body is likened to a light, an observation that we find already in Xenophon's *Symposium,* where the beauty of the young Autolycus is liked to a light at night that draws all eyes. To liken beauty to light is to suggest that beauty renders the beautiful more visible. Beauty lets us see.⁷⁵ But ever since Plato understanding has been understood in the image of sight. If light lets us see, must there not also be a higher light that lets us understand. It is this simile that is presupposed by the example of the ruby Cusanus offers us in *De li non aliud* to help us to a better understanding of his thought of God as the not-other.

You see this carbuncle stone, which the peasants call a ruby. Do you see that at this third hour of the night — at a very dark time and in a very dark place a candle is not needed because there is light in the stone? When this light wants to manifest itself, it does so by means of the stone. For in itself the light would be invisible to the sense [of sight]; for it would not be present to the sense and so would not at all be sensed, because the sense perceives only what is presented to it. Therefore the light which is in the stone conveys to the light which is in the eye what is visible regarding the stone.⁷⁶

The light in the stone answers to the light in the eye, which, without it, could not see. But the light in the ruby, no more than its glowing red, is said to be neither its essence nor its substance. That substance cannot be seen, does not present itself to our eyes. "The substance, which precedes accident, has nothing from the accidents. But the accidents

⁷⁵ Cf. Plato, *Pheadrus*, 250d: "Now beauty, as we said, shone bright amidst these visions, and in this world below we apprehend it through the clearest of our senses, clear and resplendent. For sight is the keenest mode of perception vouchsafed us through the body; wisdom, indeed, we cannot see thereby — how passionate would had been our desire for her, if she had granted us so clear an image of herself to gaze upon — nor yet any other of those beloved objects, save only beauty; for beauty alone this has been ordained, to be most manifest to sense and most lovely of them all." Trans. R. Hackforth.

have everything from the substance, since they are its accidents i.e. the shadow, the image of the substantial light."⁷⁷ The light by which we see figures thus the substantial light that gathers this thing so that it is not other than just this thing, as it gathers all things. And while this light is invisible, Cusanus yet insists that it shows itself in the visible, and more clearly in some than in others. Thus "the substantial light of the carbuncle shows itself more clearly — as in a closer likeness — in the glow of brighter splendor," in *clarioris fulgore splendentiae se clarius ostendit*. What is here called *fulgor splendentiae* is the ground of Plato's construction of the forms. But this *fulgor splendentiae* is *splendor formae*, is beauty. In the visible world experiences of the beautiful open windows to the transcendent ground of our knowing, let us glimpse the divine Word.

Following Albertus Magnus, Cusanus, too, defines the beautiful as *splendor forme, sive substancialis sive accidentalis, super partes materie proportionatas et terminatas* (51, 3-4). That definition invites a distinction between two kinds of beauty, one where the *splendor formae* is substantial, the other where it is accidental. The beauty of the spoon is an example of the latter. As Cusanus says in *De Ludo Globi* of his globe: *Deus dator est substantiae, homo accidentis, seu similitudinis substantiae. Forma globi data ligno per hominem, addita est substantiae ligni.* "God is the giver of substance, man the giver of the accident, or the likeness of substance. The form of the globe that is given to the wood by man is brought to the substance of the wood."⁷⁸ The beauty of the human body is an example of substantial beauty. As we read in *De ludo globi:* "the whole shines forth [*relucet]* in all its parts since each part is part of the whole; and so the whole human being shines forth in the hand that stands in the right proportion to the body; but the entire perfection of the human being shines forth more perfectly in the head."⁷⁹ Cusanus likens the human being to a kingdom gathered into one by its king. The body's beauty is the splendor of such a gathering. Just as "Trajan's power shines

⁷⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, *On God as Not-Other*. A translation and an Appraisal of *De li non aliud* by Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: Banning, 1987, p. 79.

⁷⁷ On God as Not-Other. A translation and an Appraisal of De li non aliud by Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: Banning, 1987, p. 81.

⁷⁸ Nicholas de Cusa, *De ludo globi, The Game of Spheres,* trans. and intro. Pauline Moffit Watts (New Tork: Abaris, 1986), pp. 66 and 67. Translation modified. See also Santinello, p. 272, nn. 14, 15.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75. Translation modified.

forth [*relucet*] in the preciousness" of his column, which his will defined and delimited, God's power shines forth in the well ordered universe⁸⁰ and in everyone of its parts, most perfectly, according to Cusanus, in the human being, the being that "enfolds intellectual and sensible nature and encloses all things within itself, so that the ancients were right in calling it a microcosm or a small world."⁸¹ It is the only being that "can suitably be elevated to the Maximum by the power of the maximal, infinite God." Thus the sermon *Tota pulchra es, amica mea* concludes by calling Christ, the bridegroom of the Song of Songs, *pulchritudo absoluta* (58, 11).⁸² Such beauty calls the bride, the human soul, with the most beautiful word, *amica*, beloved. But our soul experiences something of this call, the call of the divine logos, in all that is beautiful. The beauty of creation opens windows in the house our reason has built.⁸³ Only by thus opening ourselves to what lies

outside that house, can our life and thought gain the measures that are a presupposition of all responsibility. Faith is Love of the Beauty that Calls us. But for Cusanus that Beauty calls us most perfectly in Jesus, whose beauty is absolute.

⁸⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, *On God as Not-Other*. A translation and an Appraisal of *De li non aliud* by Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: Banning, 1987, p. 71.

⁸¹ De Docta Ignorantia, III, 3. Trans. Jasper Hopkins, Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance (Minneapolis: Banning, 1981), p. 131.

⁸² Not altogether unrelated is Kant's claim that the human being alone can furnish an ideal of beauty. Cf. *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, A55-56.

⁸³ Only recently I discovered that with this train of thought I have been unpacking something I had written in my dissertation (pp. 153-154) more than fifty years ago: "When I see an object in its ineffable particularity, I see it in the mode of the *non aliud* ... Rephrasing Kierkegaard's dictum we can say: purity of heart is to see one thing: the beautiful. Whenever I look at something and see it as some object among others, I see it not as it is in itself, not in the mode of the *non aliud*, and its beauty escapes me. It follows from this definition of beauty that anything can become beautiful if I look at it in the right way. A tree, a cloud, and old roof can appear to me as nothing other than what it is. Without the notion of another, I can no longer think of possibility. But 'where I touch on reality without its transformation into possibility, I touch on transcendence' [Karl Jaspers, *Philosophie*, 3 vols. (Berlin: Springer, 1932), III, p. 9]."

12. Birth, Death, and Resurrection

1

As we have seen, the third part of *On Learned Ignorance* develops the Christology of Cusanus. Philosophers have given it scant attention. And that decision is easy enough to understand. These chapters seem too obviously an attempt to present views acceptable to the Church. It is thus of interest that Giordano Bruno who takes so much from the first two books of *On Learned Ignorance*, especially from Book Two, would have nothing to do with Book Three. The cosmos he envisions has no place for Jesus. Key to Bruno's thought is his commitment to a freedom that knows no limits and refuses to be bound by either the Church with its dogmas or by Aristotelian science. Bruno's pantheism left no room for the Biblical God who is supposed to have created this world, to have given us his law, and to have so loved the world that he gave us his son, who died on the cross so that we might be redeemed. Bruno's cosmology implies the death of the Biblical God, who according to the Church revealed Himself in nature, made through the Word, in Scripture, and in Jesus Christ, the Word become flesh. Thus Bruno places us on the threshold of a Nietzschean nihilism.

Bruno, to be sure, was an evangelist of sorts, who found in the Copernican revolution a figure of a revolution that would bring with it a liberation of human beings from all sorts of despotic regimes. But freedom unbound does not allow for a coherent ethics or politics. Again we are confronted with the question: What is to bind human freedom? That was the question with which Nietzsche was to struggle. It is a problem with which we are still forced to struggle. And it is a question that makes it difficult to dismiss the third book quite as easily as so many philosophers, including Bruno, were able to do. The death of God only gave special weight to the question: what is to bind freedom? Does reason hold the answer? Cusanus finds his answer in faith, quite prepared to grant that such faith has to accept what to reason must appear folly, faith in the incarnation of the infinite God in a human being, a mortal finite being. That is the mystery of Christmas, said to have its foundation in God's love. Human love must answer God's love if our life is to gain meaning and measure.

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2

With this let me turn to

Chapter Five: Christ, conceived though the Holy Spirit, was born of the Virgin Mary

The title already expresses the concern to show that what is being maintained is in keeping with the position of the Church. Supported by the gospels of Matthew [1:18] and Luke [1:26-35], which say that Mary was a virgin and that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, that doctrine was not really challenged by Christians before the Enlightenment. In this connection it is of interest to note the similarity between the Virgin birth of Jesus and the birth of Dionysus by the mortal Semele and Zeus. Dionysus, too, is associated with death and resurrection, with the triumph of life over death, with bread and wine. A Jungian might want to speak of an archetype, which leaves the question: how are we to understand this archetype? The similarity gains special importance in the poetry of Hölderlin,

Given the central place of the Virgin Birth in the Christian narrative what Cusanus has to say should not seem surprising.

> Furthermore, we must consider that since the most perfect humanity, which is subsumed upwards, is the terminal contracted precision, it does not altogether exceed [the limits of] the species of human nature. Now, like is begotten from like; and, hence, the begotten proceeds from the begetter according to a natural comparative relation. But since what is terminal is free of termination, it is free of limitation and comparative relation. Hence, the maximum human being is not begettable by natural means; and yet, He cannot be altogether free of origin from that species whose terminal perfection He is. Therefore, because He is a human being, He proceeds partly according to human nature. And since He is the highest originated [being], most immediately united to the Beginning: the Beginning, from which He most immediately exists, is as a creating or begetting [Beginning], i.e., as a father; and the human beginning is as a passive [beginning] which affords a receiving material. Hence, [He comes] from a mother apart from a male seed. (135-136; 208)

Important here is he principle that like is generated from like. As a mortal human being Jesus must be born by a mortal, but as God he must be begotten by God.

We should note the **analogy between creation and incarnation**. In both cases the Word becomes visible in matter. But a standard of excellence is introduced into creation with Christ. He represents the gift of the ideal, which according to Kant is the work of the imagination, set into a work of art by the gifted artist.

In this connection we may want to think of the recurrent iconoclastic controversies, which insisted on the inability of images to do justice to the divine essence. From its very beginning Biblical religion has thus been shadowed by iconoclasm. Think of Moses smashing the golden calf. Israel's God is invisible. Such attitudes carried over into the early Church.

And yet, this God incarnated Himself and thus closed the gap between spirit and body. Should we not understand the incarnation as a mysterious necessity, demanded by both, body and soul, sensuousness and spirit? And if so, should we not join those who appealed to the Incarnation to defend art, this human incarnation? But modernity has difficulty accepting the Incarnation, which confronts us with the paradox that Mary, most definitely a human being, should be God's mother, daughter, and bride, just as it has difficulty granting more than an aesthetic significance to art, to understand it as a human creation that gives birth to something divine. Even Christians today tend to relegate the Incarnation to a past that lies behind us. Christianity has become the religion of the no longer present, the dead God, the religion of a spiritual and increasingly empty transcendence.

But let me return to Chapter Five of Book Three: I called the incarnation the gift of the ideal. But this gift has its origin in love.

But every operation proceeds from a spirit and a love which unites the active with the passive, as I earlier indicated in a certain passage. [The reference is to Book II, Chapter 7 on the Trinity] Hence, necessarily, the maximum operation (which is beyond all natural comparative relation and through which the Creator is united to the creation and which proceeds from a maximum uniting Love) is, without doubt, from the Holy Spirit, who is absolutely Love. Through the Holy Spirit alone and without the assistance of a contracted agent, the mother was able to conceive —

within the scope of her species — the Son of God the Father. Thus, just as God the Father formed by His own Spirit all the things which by Him came forth from not-being into being, so by the same most holy Spirit He did this more excellently when He worked most perfectly [i.e., when He formed Jesus]. (136; 209)

The ground of this gift, in which humanity finds its measure, is love, a love that surpasses reason. Faith answers to this love.

Cusanus defends the Virgin's immaculate conception.

No one should doubt that this mother, who was so full of virtue and who furnished the material, excelled all virgins in the perfection of every virtue and had a more excellent blessing than all other fertile women. For this [virgin-mother], who was in all respects foreordained to such a unique and most excellent virginal birth, ought rightfully to have been free of whatever could have hindered the purity or vigor, and likewise the uniqueness, of such a most excellent birth. For if the Virgin had not been pre-elected, how would she have been suited for a virginal birth without a male seed? If she had not been superblessed of the Lord and most holy, how could she have been made the Holy Spirit's sacristy, in which the Holy Spirit would fashion a body for the Son of God. If she had not remained a virgin after the birth, she would beforehand have imparted to the most excellent birth the center of maternal fertility not in her supreme perfection of brightness but dividedly and diminishedly — not as would have befit [this] unique, supreme, and so great son. Therefore, if the most holy Virgin offered her whole self to God, for whom she also wholly partook of the complete nature of fertility by the operation of the Holy Spirit, then in her the virginity remained — before the birth, during the birth, and after the birth — immaculate and uncorrupted, beyond all natural and ordinary begetting. (137; 212)

The dogma of the immaculate conception of the Virgin was pronounced only in 1854. As this passage suggests, it is much older. Again it is interesting to ask: just what is at stake? We should consider how difficult it is to accept what is here being asserted. Mary is said to have been pre-elected to give birth to the Son of God. But the Trinity forces us to

think the Son as God. Does Mary, too, then not, like her son, belong inseparably to the very essence of God?

The Virgin birth required a fullness of perfection in time. The Virgin's perfection, her **fullness of fertility** eludes our understanding just as does the idea of the **fullness of time**.

For from the virgin-mother [Jesus] was able to exist as a human being only temporally — and from God the Father only eternally; but the temporal birth required a fullness of perfection in time, just as [it required] in the mother a fullness of fertility. Therefore, when the fullness of time arrived: since [Jesus] could not be born as a human being apart from time, He was born at the time and place most fitting thereto and yet most concealed from all creatures. For the supreme bounties (*plenitudines*) are incomparable with our daily experiences. Hence, no reasoning was able to grasp them by any sign, even though by a certain very hidden prophetic inspiration certain obscure signs, darkened by human likenesses, transmitted them; and from these signs the wise could reasonably have foreseen that the Word was to be incarnated in the fullness of time. But the precise place, time, or manner was foreknown only to the Eternal Begetter, who ordained that when all things were in a state of moderate silence, the Son would in the course of the night descend from the Heavenly Citadel into the virginal womb and would at the ordained and fitting time manifest Himself to the world in the form of a servant. (137; 213-214)

We should note that Cusanus here speaks of a twofold birth, an eternal birth from God the Father and a temporal birth from the Virgin. I want to single out here the phrase: "when all things were in a state of moderate silence, [*dum medium silentium tenerent omnia*] the Son would in the course of the night descend from the Heavenly Citadel." What are we to make of this? In *Revelations* there is said to be silence in heaven for about half an hour when the Lamb opens the Seventh Seal. (8, 1) There a number of Biblical references to the middle of the night; Cusanus would also appear to have been thinking of the middle of time, the time of the Incarnation, as the middle between Adam and the end of time, as a number of his sermons suggest. Just as space has a spiritual

center, an *axis mundi*, marked by the tree of life and the cross, so does time. That both should have such a center surpasses reason.

Chapter Six: The Mystery of the death of Jesus Christ

In this chapter Cusanus seeks to shed light on the mystery of the crucifixion. Once again his intent to reconcile his account with established doctrine is evident, or rather, to use this account to shed light on established doctrine. The chapter begins with a reassertion of the **central position of reason**, which is placed between intellect and sense, between spirit and animal.

> It accords with the expression of my intent that a short digression here be made — in order to attain more clearly unto the mystery of the Cross. There is no doubt that a human being consists of senses, intellect, and reason (which is in between and which connects the other two). Now, order subordinates the senses to reason and reason to intellect. The intellect is not temporal and mundane but is free of time and of the world. The senses are temporally subject to the motions of the world. With respect to the intellect, reason is on the horizon, so to speak; but with respect to the senses, it is at the zenith, as it were; thus, things that are within time and things that are beyond time coincide in reason. (138; 215)

The understanding of human being that we are presented with here is broadly Platonic or Aristotelian. Once again a look at the *Phaedo* seems especially relevant. There is a supra-individual intellect, free of time and the world. We testify to that supra-temporal intellect every time we lay claim to truth. Reason joins intellect to the sensible and temporal.

The animal is said to be governed by two drives: concupiscence (*potentia concupiscibilis*) and anger (*potentia irascibilis*). Reason allows us to rule over desire's passions. Cusanus in this connection sums up his ethical position in a few lines:

The senses, which belong to the animal [nature], are incapable [of attaining unto] supratemporal and spiritual things. Therefore, what is animal does not perceive the things which are of God, for God is spirit and more than spirit. Accordingly, perceptual knowledge occurs in the darkness of the ignorance of eternal things; and in accordance with the

flesh it is moved, through the power of concupiscence, toward carnal desires and, through the power of anger, toward warding off what hinders it. (128; 216)

The animal in us seeks out what is pleasurable and seeks to avoid what stands in the way of such pursuit; it seeks pleasure and seeks to avoid pain. Utilitarianism answers to the animal we are. Cusanus here follows St. Thomas. See Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.* I, qu. 81. art. 2.

But supraexcellent reason contains — in its own nature and as a result of its capability of participating in the intellectual nature — certain laws through which, as ruler over desire's passions, it tempers and calms the passions, in order that a human being will not make a goal of perceptible things and be deprived of his intellect's spiritual desire. And the most important of [these] laws are that no one do to another what he would not want done to himself, that eternal things be preferred to temporal things, and clean and holy things to unclean and base things. The laws which are elicited from reason by the most holy lawgivers and are taught (according to the difference of place and time) as remedies for those who sin against reason work together to the foregoing end. (138; 216)

The law that "no one do to another what he would not want done to himself" later came to be known as the golden rule. Cusanus claims that it is implicit in reason. It is indeed not confined to the Christian or the western tradition.

In keeping with the doctrine of the fall, Cusanus sees human being as marked by a profound lack. Our nature deprives us from the enjoyment of the most excellent good, which is intellectual and eternal:

Even if the senses were subject to reason in every respect and did not follow after the passions which are natural to them, the intellect — soaring higher [than reason] — sees that nonetheless man cannot of himself attain to the goal of his intellectual and eternal desires.

That is to say, a life ruled by reason alone — think of a Kantian ethic — finally leaves us dissatisfied.

For since from the seed of Adam man is begotten with carnal delight (in whom, in accordance with propagation, the animality prevails over the

spirituality): his nature — which in its basis of origin is immersed in the carnal delights through which the man springs forth into existence by way of a father — remains altogether unable to transcend temporal things in order to embrace spiritual things. Accordingly, if the weight of carnal delights draws reason and intellect downward, so that they consent to these motions and do not resist them, it is clear that a man so drawn downward and so turned away from God, is altogether deprived of the enjoyment of the most excellent good, which, in the manner of the intellectual, is upward and eternal. But if reason governs the senses, still it is necessary that the intellect govern reason in order that the intellect may adhere — by formed faith and above reason — to the Mediator, so that it can be drawn unto glory by God the Father. (138-139; 217)

We cannot simply deny our animal desires. We may pay lip service to the golden rule, but our actions will show us that we lack the strength to live up to it. Kantian morality remains an ideal we betray in our behavior. And the same goes for the utilitarian commandment that we serve the greatest good of the greatest number. But even if we were to live a life ruled by reason, reason by itself, is not able to overcome that lack which is bound up with our mortal animal being. Such an overcoming requires faith.

Christ alone is exempt from this lack. Christ is he in whom human nature was able to return to God the Father of its own power. Our homecoming is said to be possible only through faith in Christ, faith in what reason cannot comprehend. Cusanus speaks of "formed faith' (*fides formata*). (See Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.*, II, II, qu. 4, art, 4) Such faith would seem to require a power over oneself that cannot be willed, that can only be acquired through grace.

Except for Christ Jesus, who descended from Heaven, there was never anyone who had [enough] power over himself and over his own nature (which in its origin is so subject to the sins of carnal desire) to be able, of himself, to ascend beyond his own origin to eternal and heavenly things. Jesus is the one who ascended by His own power and in whom the human nature (begotten not from the will of the flesh but from God) was not hindered from mightily returning to God the Father. (139; 218) Unable to save ourselves, we mortals require a savior. That is why God became man.

(Cf. Anselm, *Cur deus homo*)

For the maximality of human nature brings it about that in the case of each man who cleaves to Christ through formed faith Christ is this very man by means of a most perfect union — each's numerical distinctness being preserved. Because of this union the following statement of Christ's is true: "Whatever you have done to one of the least of my [brethren], you have done to me." And, conversely, whatever Christ Jesus merited by His suffering, those who are one with Him also merited — different degrees of merit being preserved in accordance with the different degree of each [man's] union with Christ through faith formed by love. Hence, in Christ the faithful are circumcised; in Him they are baptized; in Him they die; in Him they are made alive again through resurrection; in Him they are united to God and are glorified. (139; 219)

Chapter Seven: The Mystery of the Resurrection

Cusanus is concerned here to explain the **necessity of Christ's death**. Why must this ultimate negativity be made part of the ideal? The perfection of Christ could be compared to the perfection of a tragedy.

Consider God as **ground** and **measure** of our being. But while the idea of God as measure of our being requires something like the incarnation, the manifestation of God as the ideal human being does not yet demonstrate the necessity of Christ's death. Is this **death** not precisely the **lack** that is incompatible with perfection. But Christ suffers his death and wills such suffering. And how could this perfection be a genuinely human perfection if Christ's humanity did not include his mortality and the victory over that mortality? **Death and resurrection** belong together. **Faith in Christ lets death lose his sting.**

> The man Christ, being passible and mortal, could attain unto the glory of the Father (who is Immortality itself, since He is Absolute Life) by no other way than [the following]: that what was mortal put on immortality. And this was not at all possible apart from death. For how could what is mortal have put on immortality otherwise than by being stripped of

mortality? How would it be free of mortality except by having paid the debt of death? Therefore, Truth itself says that those who do not understand that Christ had to die and in this way enter into glory are foolish and of slow mind. But since I have already indicated that for our sakes Christ died a most cruel death, I must now say the following: since it was not fitting for human nature to be led to the triumph of immortality otherwise than through victory over death, [Christ] underwent death in order that human nature would rise again with Him to eternal life and that the animal, mortal body would become spiritual and incorruptible. [Christ] was able to be a true man only if He was mortal; and He was able to lead mortal [human] nature to immortality only if through death human nature became stripped of mortality. (140; 221)

In Christ the abyss that separates Creator and creature is mysteriously bridged. Accordingly there is a necessary fusion of the ways we speak about the human and the divine nature. Given the union of Father and Soon in God, the divine nature has also human characteristics just as human nature has also divine characteristics and this reflects itself in the ways we speak about both:

In what precedes I indicated that the maximum man, Jesus, was not able to have in Himself a person that existed separately from the divinity. For He is the maximum [human being]. And, accordingly, there is a sharing of the respective modes of speaking [about the human nature and the divine nature], so that the human things coincide with the divine things; for His humanity — which on account of the supreme union is inseparable from His divinity (as if it were put on and assumed by the divinity) — cannot exist as separate in person. But a man is a union of a body and a soul — the separation of which is death. Therefore, because the maximum humanity is subsumed in the divine person: at the time of [Jesus's] death neither the soul nor the body could have been separated (not even with respect to spatial separation) from the divine person, without which the man [Jesus] did not exist. (141; 223)

The conclusion of this chapter brings out the paradoxical nature of Christ's resurrection:

And since the humanity was inseparably rooted on high in the divine incorruptibility: when the temporal, corruptible motion was completed, the dissolution could occur only in the direction of the root of its incorruptibility. Therefore, after the end of temporal motion ([an end] which was death) and after the removal of all the things which temporally befell the truth of the human nature, the same Jesus arose — not with a body which was burdensome, corruptible, shadowy, passible (and so on for the other things which follow upon temporal composition) but with a true body which was glorious, impassible, unbehindered, and immortal (as the truth which was free from temporal conditions required). Moreover, the truth of the hypostatic union of the human nature with the divine nature necessarily required this union [of body and soul]. Hence, Blessed Jesus had to arise from the dead, as He Himself says when He states: "Christ had to suffer in this way and to arise from the dead on the third day." (142; 226)

Precisely by affirming his death, by sacrificing himself for our sake, Christ conquered death and "stripped human nature of mortality." That the affirmation of death for the sake of humanity is the gate to true life is of course an old theme. Think once more of the *Phaedo*; or of the *Symposium*, where Alcestis is rewarded with true life for he willingness to die for her husband.

Chapter Eight: Christ, the Firstfruits of those who sleep, ascended to Heaven continues the account.

Now that the foregoing points have been exhibited, it is easy to see that Christ is the Firstborn from the dead. For before Him no one was able to arise [from the dead] — since human nature had not yet, in the course of time, reached a maximum and was not yet united with incorruptibility and immortality, as it was in Christ. For all human beings were powerless until the coming of Him who said: "I have the power to lay down my life and the power to take it up again." Therefore, in Christ, who is the Firstfruits of those who sleep, human nature put on immortality. But there is only one indivisible humanity and specific essence of all human beings.

Through it all individual human beings are numerically distinct human beings, so that Christ and all human beings have the same humanity, though the numerical distinctness of the individuals remains unconfused. Hence, it is evident that the humanity of all the human beings who whether temporally before or after Christ — either have existed or will exist has, in Christ, put on immortality. Therefore, it is evident that the following inference holds: the man Christ arose; hence, after [the cessation of] all motion of temporal corruptibility, all men will arise through Him, so that they will be eternally incorruptible. (14-143: 227)

Cusanus here criticizes the Saracens for not recognizing that the maximum and most perfect man Christ has to be identified with God.

If I am not mistaken, you see that [a religion] which does not embrace Christ is not a perfect religion, leading men to the final and most coveted goal of peace. Think of how discordant is the belief of the Saracens, who (1) affirm that Christ is the maximum and most perfect man, born of a virgin and translated alive into Heaven but (2) deny that He is God. Surely they have been blinded, because they assert what is impossible. But even from the points stated in the foregoing manner one who has understanding can see, clearer than day, that a man who is not also God cannot be maximum and in all respects most perfect, supernaturally born of a virgin. These [Saracens] are mindless persecutors of the Cross of Christ, being ignorant of His mysteries. They will not taste the divine fruit of His redemption, nor are they led to expect it by their law of Mohammed, which promises only to satisfy their cravings for pleasure. In the hope that these cravings are extinguished in us by the death of Christ, we yearn to apprehend an incorruptible glory. (143-144; 229)

Cusanus owned the Koran in a Latin translation by Robert of Ketton (Robertus Ketenensis) (1143). Already at the time of the Council of Basel he was concerned with Islam. When he travelled to Constantinople that interest intensified. The fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453 must have made the issue still more pressing. Presumably still in that same year he wrote *De Pace Fidei*. A more extensive confrontation with the Koran is found in *Cribratio Alchoran* (1460/61).

An analogous criticism is made of the Jews.

The Jews likewise confess with the Saracens that Messiah is the maximum, most perfect, and immortal man; but, held back by the same diabolical blindness, they deny that He is God. They also do not hope (as do we servants of Christ) to obtain the supreme happiness of enjoying God - even as they also shall not obtain it. And what I deem to be even more remarkable is that the Jews, as well as the Saracens, believe that there will be a general resurrection but do not admit its possibility through the man who is also God. For suppose [the following] be granted: that if the motion of generation and corruption ceases, the perfection of the universe cannot occur apart from resurrection, since human nature (which is an intermediate nature) is an essential part of the universe; and without human nature not only would the universe [not] be perfect but it would not even be a universe. And [suppose it also be granted] that therefore the following is necessary: that if motion ever ceases, either the entire universe will cease or men will rise to incorruptibility. (In these men the nature of all intermediate things is complete, so that the other animals will not have to arise, since man is their perfection.) Or [suppose] the resurrection be said to be going to occur in order that the whole man will receive, from a just God, retribution according to his merits. [Even if all of the foregoing be said], still, above all, Christ-through whom alone human nature can attain unto incorruptibility-must be believed to be God and man. (144; 229)

Note the remarkable statement that **without human nature the universe would not be a universe**. In the sermon *Dies significatus* of 1439 he says similarly: For if God had not assumed human essence — since this as center comprehends all other beings within itself — the universe would not be perfect — indeed it could not even be said to be. This reminds me of Baumgarten's analogy between the universe and a successful poem: God is the theme of the universe. But **can God be the theme of the universe except by being also man**? Transfigured humanity may be understood as the theme of the universe: **Christ is the goal of the human desire for being and understanding**.

Faith in the resurrection, Cusanus insists, is the affirmation of the divinity and the humanity of Christ. In the thought of the perfect human being, Christ, time and eternity are bent together.

Christ is the center and the circumference of intellectual nature; and since the intellect encompasses all things, Christ is above all things. Nevertheless, as if in His own temple, He dwells in the holy rational souls and in the holy intellectual spirits, which are the heavens, declaring His glory. So, then, we understand that Christ — in that He "ascended above all the heavens, in order to fill all things" — ascended above all space and time unto an incorruptible mansion, beyond everything which can be spoken of. Since He is God, He is all in all. Since He is Truth, He reigns in the intellectual heavens. And since as the life of all rational spirits He is their center, it is not the case that, with respect to location, He is seated on the circumference rather than at the center. And, therefore, He who is the "Fount of life" for souls, as well as their goal, affirms that the Kingdom of Heaven is also within men. (144-145; 232)

13. Death, Damnation, and the Church

1

We have come to the end of this term and to the end of *On Leaned Ignorance*. Last time we discussed Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter, i.e. birth, death, and resurrection of the incarnated Word. What is the significance of resurrection rather than the kind of immortality that, e.g. the *Phaedo* would seem to promise? Or the kind of consolation that Hegel offers at the end of the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, a work very much in the spirit of Christianity?

> Das Ziel, das absolute Wissen, oder der sich als Geist wissende Geist hat zu seinem Wege die Erinnerung der Geister, wie sie an ihnen selbst sind und die Organisation ihres Reiches vollbringen. Ihre Aufbewahrung nach der Seite ihres freien in der Form der Zufälligkeit erscheinenden Daseins ist die Geschichte, nach der Seite ihrer begriffenen Organisation aber die Wissenschaft des erscheinenden Wissens; beide zusammen, die begriffene Geschichte, bilden die Erinnerung und die Schädelstätte des absoluten Geistes, die Wirklichkeit, Wahrheit und Gewißheit seines Throns, ohne den er das leblose Einsame wäre; nur –

aus dem Kelche dieses Geisterreiches schäumt ihm seine Unendlichkeit.

The goal, which is Absolute Knowledge or Spirit knowing itself as Spirit, finds its pathway in the recollection of spiritual forms (*Geister*) as they are in themselves and as they accomplish the organization of their spiritual kingdom. Their conservation, looked at from the side of their free existence appearing in the form of contingency, is History; looked at from the side of their intellectually comprehended organization, it is the Science of the ways in which knowledge appears . Both together, or History (intellectually) comprehended (*begriffen*), form at once the recollection and the Golgotha of Absolute Spirit, the reality, the truth, the certainty of its throne, without which it were lifeless, solitary, and alone. Only

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The chalice of this realm of spirits Foams forth to God His own Infinitude [Translated by J. B. Baillie]

The spirit would be lifeless and alone if it did not manifest itself in the world. History is that manifestation, but history is marred by the accidental. Yet there is reason in history, which despite all contingencies can be understood as the unfolding of the divine spirit. The unfolding can be understood in its organization. History can thus be understood as the unfolding of spirit. But so understood history is the golgatha of the absolute spirit, a place of skulls. What here takes the place of redemption is recollection. History is said to be the recollection of the absolute spirit. But what consolation can this offer to mortals? Resembling Plato, does Hegel offer more than an invitation to rise above all that is accidental, i.e. above ourselves? Does Cusanus offer more? With this question in mind let me return to Cusanus and *On Learned Ignorance*.

2

Chapter Nine: Christ is the judge of the living and the dead

Who is a judge more just than He who is Justice itself? For Christ, the head and the source of every rational creature, is Maximal Reason, from which all reason derives. But reason judges discriminatively. Hence, Christ — who (while remaining God, who is the rewarder of all) assumed rational human nature with all rational creatures — is rightfully the judge of the living and the dead. (145; 233)

Vivorum et mortuorum iudex est; Cusanus here repeats almost verbatim the standard formula of the Creed: *venturus est iudicare vivos et mortuos*. But the following discussion of light may seem to lose sight of what is usually thought of when we speak of Christ as Judge.

But through Himself and in Himself Christ judges — above all time — all things. For He embraces all creatures, since He is the maximum human being, in whom, because He is God, all things exist. As God He is Infinite Light in which there is no darkness. This Light illumines all things, so that in it all things are most manifest to it. For this infinite, intellectual Light enfolds, beyond all time, what is present as well as what is past,

what is living as well as what is dead — just as corporeal light is the basis (*hypostasis*) of all colors. (145; 233)

Light here has a function not altogether unlike that Hegel ascribes to spirit, not surprising perhaps, given that Christ is said to be absolute reason.

We come closer to the last judgment with the transformation of the **light** metaphor into the **fire** metaphor, which goes back to Pseudo-Dionysius.

But Christ is as purest fire, which is inseparable from light and which exists not in itself but in light. And He is that spiritual fire of life and understanding which — as consuming all things and taking all things into itself — tests and judges all things, as does the judgment of material fire, which examines all things. (145; 233)

Christ as judge is said to be an intellectual fire. Not all things are able to receive light and fire in the same manner.

All rational spirits are judged in Christ, as what is heatable by fire [is judged] in fire. Of these [heatable things] the one, if it remains in the fire for a long time, is transformed into the likeness of fire (e.g., most excellent and most perfect gold is so gold and so intensely fire-hot that it appears to be no more gold than fire); but some other thing does not participate in the intensity of the fire to such a degree (e.g., purified silver, bronze, or iron); nevertheless, they all seem to be transformed into fire, although each [is transformed] in its own degree. And this judgment belongs only to the fire, not to the things heated by fire, since each thing heated by fire apprehends in each other such thing only that very radiant fire and not the differences between each such thing. By comparison, if we were to see gold, silver, and copper fused in a maximum fire, we would not apprehend the differences of the metals after they had been transformed into the form of fire. However, if the fire were an intellectual [being], it would know the degrees of perfection of each [metal] and to what extent (according to these degrees) the fire's capability for intensity would be differently present in each thing. (145; 234)

We should note the way Cusanus joins and opposes here the metaphors of light and fire. Hence, there are certain things — things heatable by fire, continuing

incorruptibly in fire, and capable of receiving light and heat — which on account of their purity are transformable into the likeness of fire; and this occurs differently, according to greater and lesser degrees. But there are other things which, because of their impurity, are not transformable into light, even if they are heatable. In a similar manner, Christ, who is judge, according to one and the same most simple judgment, imparts most justly and without envy, at one instant and to all [rational spirits] (imparts not in the order of time but in the order of nature) the "warmth," so to speak, of created reason — in order to bestow, by the heat which is received, a divine, intellectual light from on high. Thus, God is all things in all things; and all things are in God through the Mediator; and [every rational spirit] is equal to God to the extent that this is possible in accordance with each's capability.

But some things, because of the fact that they are more unified and pure, are able to receive not only heat but also light; other things are barely [able to receive] heat and are not [at all able to receive light. (146: 235)

Everything can be subjected to fire, but much, when so subjected, is destroyed. Fire thus has the power to purify and to transform or to destroy.

Immortality is then discussed in a way that may seem to recall Plato's *Phaedo*.

However, when an intellectual spirit — whose operation is supratemporal and, as it were, on the horizon of eternity — turns toward eternal things, it cannot convert these things into itself, since they are eternal and incorruptible. But since it itself is incorruptible, it also is not converted into these things in such way that it ceases to be an intellectual substance. Instead, it is converted into these [in such way] that it is absorbed into a likeness to the eternal things — [absorbed], however, according to degrees, so that the more fervently it is turned toward these things, the more fully it is perfected by them and the more deeply its being is hidden in the Eternal Being. But since Christ is immortal and still lives and is still life and truth, whoever turns to Him turns to life and truth. And the more ardently [he does] this, the more he is elevated from mundane and corruptible things unto eternal things, so that his life is hidden in Christ. For the virtues are eternal: justice remains forever, and so too does truth. (145; 236)

The metaphorical expression: "the intellectual spirit is on the horizon of eternity" should remind us of the earlier quote:

With respect to the intellect, reason is on the horizon, so to speak; but with respect to the senses, it is at the zenith, as it were; thus, things that are within time and things that are beyond time coincide in reason. (138; 215)

Sensibility, reason, and intellect are here distinguished. The intellect offers the key to the desired homecoming to eternal being.

It is possible to read these chapters as asserting that only within the Christian church is salvation to be found. But it is also possible to offer a different reading. For if everyone who loves truth loves Christ, must not Plato, too, have been a lover of Christ, without being able to give the object of his love that name? Love of Christ here would name that power of self-transcendence that is a presupposition of the pursuit of truth.

> Therefore, just as everyone who loves is within love, so all who love truth are in Christ. And just as everyone-who-loves loves through love, so all who love truth love it through Christ. Hence, no one knows the truth unless the spirit of Christ is in him. And just as it is impossible that there be a lover without love, so it is impossible that someone have God without [having] the spirit of Christ; only in this spirit can we worship God. Accordingly, unbelievers — who are unconverted to Christ and who are incapable of receiving the light of transforming glory — have already been condemned to darkness and to the shadow of death, since they have turned from the life which is Christ. Through union [with Christ] all [who love Christ] are gloriously filled with His fullness alone. Later, when I shall speak about the church, I will add — on the same foundation and for the sake of our consolation — some more points regarding this union. (147; 238)

Hovering between philosophy and the traditional faith these concluding chapters especially are profoundly ambiguous.
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3

Chapter Ten: The Judge's sentence

In this chapter Cusanus addresses more explicitly the doctrine of damnation, even as he places it beyond our comprehension.

It is evident that no one among mortals comprehends the judgment and sentence of this judge. For since it is beyond all time and motion, it is not disclosed by comparative or inferential investigation or by vocal utterance or by such signs as indicate a delay or a protraction. But just as all things were created in the Word (for He spoke and they were created), so in the same Word, which is also called Reason, all things are judged. And there is no interval between the sentence and its execution, but what happens at an instant is the following: the resurrection and the securing of the respective end (viz., glorification with regard to the translation of the sons of God and damnation with regard to the exclusion of the unconverted) are not separated by a moment of time — [not] even by an indivisible [moment]. (147; 239)

The following paragraph is once again quite within the Platonic tradition.

The intellectual nature, which is beyond time and is not subject to temporal corruption, contains, in accordance with its nature, incorruptible forms — e.g., mathematical forms, which in their own way are abstract (but are also present in natural objects) and which are hidden away in the intellectual nature and are easily transformed. These [incorruptible forms] are, for us, guiding signs of the intellectual nature's incorruptibility; for [the intellect is] the incorruptible locus of incorruptible [forms]. Now, by its natural movement [the intellectual nature] is moved toward most abstract truth — as if toward the goal of its own desires and toward the ultimate and most delectable object. And since such an object as this is all things, because it is God, the intellect — insatiable until it attains thereunto — is immortal and incorruptible, for it is satisfied only by an eternal object. (147; 240)

To be damned is to have fallen into the **dark chaos of pure possibility**. Is damnation then freedom that fails to recognize anything to bind it, freedom without love?

In that case, since (because of its turning away from truth at the hour of separation and because of its turning to what is corruptible) it falls toward corruptible objects of desire, toward uncertainty and confusion, and into the dark chaos of pure possibility (where there is no actual certainty): the intellect is rightly said to have descended unto intellectual death. Indeed, for the intellectual soul to understand is for it to be; and for it to understand the object of desire is for it to live. Hence, just as, for it, eternal life is finally to apprehend the unchanging, eternal object of its desire, so, for it, eternal death is to be separated from this unchanging object of desire and to be hurled into the chaos of confusion, where in its own manner it is eternally tormented by fire. [This manner is] graspable by us only analogously to the torment of someone who is deprived of vital nourishment and health — and [deprived] not only of these but also of the hope of ever obtaining them, so that he is ever dying an agonizing death, without extinction and termination. (148; 241)

Damnation is understood here as a descent into the chaos of possibility that according to the Platonic tradition precedes creation and here is understood as the end-state of the damned. Cusanus is very much aware that talk of heaven and hell is only metaphorical:

Therefore, with regard to all the musical and harmonic signs of joy, delight, and glory which, as signs for thinking what is known to us, are found to be indicators-of-eternal-life handed down by the Fathers: they are very remote perceptible signs — infinitely distant from the intellectual [realities], which are not perceivable by any imaging. Similarly, with regard to the punishments of Hell, which are likened to a fire of the element sulphur, to a fire from pitch, and to other perceptible torments: these latter do not admit of any comparison with those fiery intellectual miseries from which Jesus Christ, our life and our salvation, deigns to save us. He is blessed forever. Amen. (149; 243)

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4

Chapter Eleven: the mysteries of faith

The title raises the question of how these mysteries are related to those mysteries already discussed such as incarnation and resurrection: is this an inquiry into the essence of such mysteries rather than into particular mysteries?

The chapter begins by reasserting that faith is the beginning of understanding in a way that by now should pose few difficulties.

All our forefathers unanimously maintain that faith is the beginning of understanding. For in every branch of study certain things are presupposed as first principles. They are grasped by faith alone, and from them is elicited an understanding of the matters to be treated. For everyone who wills to ascend to learning must believe those things without which he cannot ascend. For Isaiah says, "Unless you believe, you will not understand." Therefore, faith enfolds within itself everything which is understandable. But understanding is the unfolding of faith. Therefore, understanding is guided by faith, and faith is increased by understanding. Hence, where there is no sound faith, there is no true understanding. Thus, it is evident what kind of conclusion erroneous beginnings and a weakness of foundation imply. But there is no more perfect faith than Truth itself, which is Jesus. (149; 244)

How then is **cognitive faith** different from **religious faith**? How are we to distinguish that right faith which is said to be a gift from God from false faith? Important would appear to be the distinction between faith that comes before persuasive considerations and faith that begins where persuasive considerations cease:

Since God is not knowable in this world (where by reason and by opinion or by doctrine we are led, with symbols, through the more known to the unknown). He is apprehended only where persuasive considerations cease and faith appears. Through faith we are caught up, in simplicity, so that being in a body incorporeally (because in spirit) and in the world not mundanely but celestially we may incomprehensibly contemplate Christ above all reason and intelligence, in the third heaven of most simple intellectuality. (150; 245)

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Christ is a mountain to whom believers are led in learned ignorance:

Therefore, we who are believers in Christ are led in learned ignorance unto the Mountain that is Christ and that we are forbidden to touch with the nature of our animality. (150; 246)

Jesus is said to be "the perfection of every creature," "the goal of all things." (150-151; 247), "manifested to one who ascends to Christ by faith. The divine efficacy of this faith is inexplicable," "as the deeds of the saints bear witness." (151; 248)

Cusanus proceeds to apply the teaching of the coincidence of opposites to this faith.

In the preceding [sections] there can very frequently be found repeated [the doctrine] that the minimum coincides with the maximum. This doctrine applies to the faith which is unqualifiedly maximum in actuality and in power. This maximum faith] cannot be in a pilgrim (*viator*), who is still not a full attainer (*comprehensor*) [of his goal], as was Jesus. However, the pilgrim must will actually to have for himself maximum faith in Christ — [to have it] to such an extent that his faith will be elevated to such a level of indubitable certainty that it will also be not at all faith but supreme certainty devoid of all doubt in any respect whatsoever. This is the mighty faith which is so maximal that it is also minimal, that it embraces all the things which are believable with regard to Him who is Truth. (151; 248)

We are pilgrims, in search of our true home, a home that we yet do not comprehend. Our faith could therefore always be greater. Perfect faith is minimal because it coincides with comprehension. Jesus possessed such faith.

Cusanus' invocation of the coincidence of opposites which would make one no longer a pilgrim invites the question whether anyone is altogether without faith and therefore irredeemably damned? In Platonic fashion Cusanus understands the being of man as fundamentally **erotic**, as the **desire to live** and as the **desire to understand**, where only the latter allows the former to find satisfaction.

> For without love faith cannot be maximum. For if every living thing loves to live and if every understanding thing loves to understand, how can Jesus be believed to be immortal life and infinite truth if He is not

loved supremely? For life *per se* is lovable; and if Jesus is most greatly believed to be eternal life, He cannot fail to be loved. For without love faith is not living but dead and is not faith at all. But love is the form of faith, giving to faith true being; indeed, love is the sign of most steadfast faith. Therefore, if for the sake of Christ all things are set aside, and if in relation to Christ the body and the soul are counted as nothing: this is a sign of maximum faith. (152; 250)

Christ is the ideal we all bear within ourselves. One might accept this but at the same time insist that the idea is self-contradictory and thus arrive at a position rather like Sartre's: that what we most deeply desire is a contradiction. The doctrine of Learned Ignorance should make this reply a bit more difficult by showing how much the infinite invades all our experience.

Cusanus had asserted in the very beginning of *On Learned Ignorance* that no natural desire is vain. If this is accepted then it follows that Christ exists and that through him our desire can find satisfaction.

Moreover, faith cannot be great apart from the holy hope of enjoying Jesus. For how would anyone have assured faith if he did not hope for what was promised him by Christ? If he does not believe that he will have the eternal life promised by Christ to believers, in what sense does he believe Christ? Or how is it that he believes that Christ is truth if he does not have assured hope in His promises? How would he choose death for Christ's sake if he did not hope for immortality? (152; 251)

5

Chapter Twelve: The church

Cusanus insists here that even when united to Christ in one church **the faithful** retain their separate identities.

Since it is necessary that the faith in different men be of unequal degree and therefore admit of greater and lesser degree, no one can attain to maximum faith, than which there can be no greater power. (Similarly, no one [can attain] to maximum love either.) For if maximum faith, which could not be a greater power, were present in a pilgrim, he would also have to be an attainer [of his pilgrim's goal]. For just as the maximum in a genus is the supreme goal of the genus, so it is the beginning of a higher [genus]. Accordingly, unqualifiedly maximum faith cannot be present in anyone who is not also an attainer [of his pilgrim's goal]. Similarly, unqualifiedly maximum love cannot be present in a lover who is not also the beloved. Accordingly, neither unqualifiedly maximum faith nor unqualifiedly maximum love befit anyone other than Jesus. (152; 254)

Jesus is said by Cusanus to be both *amor et caritas*, which Hopkins translates as "*is* love" (154; 255). Caritas corresponds to the Greek *agape*, *amor* to *eros*. *Amor* is the more encompassing term, suggesting a desire to unite with the beloved, while *caritas* suggests a higher love. According to Thomas Aquinas *caritas* is necessarily *amor*, but not the reverse.⁸⁴

The Church Cusanus understands as the body of Christ, which is gathered into a unity precisely through Christ:

Therefore, this union is a church, or congregation, of many in one — just as many members are in one body, each member existing with its own role. (In the body, one member is not the other member; but each member is in the one body, and by the mediation of the body it is united with each other member. No member of the body can have life and existence apart from the body, even though in the body one member is all the others only by the mediation of the body.) Therefore, as we journey here below, the truth of our faith can exist only in the spirit of Christ — the order of believers remaining, so that in one Jesus there is diversity in harmony. And once we are freed from this church militant: when we arise, we can arise only in Christ, so that in this way there will also be one church of those who are triumphant, each existing in his own order. And at that time the truth of our flesh will exist not in itself but in the truth of Christ's flesh: and the truth of our body will exist in the truth of Christ's body; and the truth of our spirit will exist in the truth of Christ Jesus's spirit — as branches exist in the vine. Thus, Christ's one humanity will be in all men, and

⁸⁴ S. Th. I, II, qu. 26, art. 3c. See Bormann, PTW I, 152-153, 254, 21f.

Christ's one spirit will be in all spirits — so that each [believing individual] will be in Christ, so that from all [members] there will be one Christ. And then whoever in this life receives any one of those who are Christ's receives Christ; and what is done to one of the least of these is done to Christ. (By comparison, whoever injures Plato's hand injures Plato; and whoever harms the smallest toe harms the whole man.) And whoever rejoices in Heaven over the least one rejoices over Christ and sees in each one Jesus, through whom [he sees] Blessed God. Thus, through His son, our God will be all things in all things; and in His son and through Him each [believer] will be with God and with all things, so that [each's] joy will be full, free of all envy and deprivation. (154; 256)

The state of **blessedness** is discussed as the **coincidence of desire and satisfaction**. If desire gave way to satisfaction, so would life. But what we desire is precisely eternal life.

Now, our intellectual desire is [the desire] to live intellectually — i.e., to enter further and further into life and joy. And since that life is infinite: the blessed, still desirous, are brought further and further into it. And so, they are filled-being, so to speak, thirsty ones drinking from the Fount of life. And because this drinking does not pass away into a past (since it is within eternity), the blessed are ever drinking and ever filled; and yet, they have never drunk and have never been filled.

Blessed is God, who has given us an intellect which cannot be filled in the course of time. Since the intellect's desire does not come to an end, the intellect — on the basis of its temporally insatiable desire apprehends itself as beyond corruptible time and as immortal. And the intellect recognizes that it cannot be satisfied by the intellectual-life-itdesires except during the enjoyment of the maximum, most excellent, and never-failing good. This enjoyment does not pass away into a past, because the appetite does not fade away during the enjoyment. (155; 258-259)

Chapter and book conclude by distinguishing between

1. The Absolute Union of God

2. The hypostatic union of humanity and divinity in Christ

3. The union of the blessed with Christ, which is at the same time the homecoming of creation to its origin.

And yet these three unions are one:

The Absolute Union is neither a greater nor a lesser [union] than the union of the natures in Jesus or [the union] of the blessed in Heaven. For it is the maximum Union which is (a) the Union of all unions and (b) that which is complete union. It does not admit of degrees of more or less, and it proceeds from Oneness and Equality - as is indicated in Book One. And the union of the natures in Christ is neither a greater nor a lesser [union] than the oneness of the church of the triumphant; for since it is the maximum union of the natures, it therefore does not admit of degrees of more and less; hence, all the different things which are united receive their oneness from the maximum union of the natures of Christ, through which union the union of the church is that which it is. But the union of the church is the maximum ecclesiastical union. Therefore, since it is maximal, it coincides on high with the hypostatic union of the natures in Christ. And since the union of the natures of Jesus is maximal, it coincides with the Absolute Union, which is God. And so, the union of the church, which is [a union] of individuals, [coincides] with the [Absolute Union]. (156-157; 261-262)

What follows is only the letter to Cadinal Cesarini, which we discussed in our very first session. It tells us that the central thought of the work came to him as a divine inspiration when he returned from Constantinople late in 1437. This makes me think of Nietzsche who describes his *Zarathustra* similarly as the product of a sudden inspiration.

ⁱ Ibid., p. 137.