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Origins of the Modern World Picture

Cusanus and Alberti

Seminar Notes

Fall Semester 2012

Yale University

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1. Cusanus, Alberti, and Heidegger's Understanding of the Modern Age as the "Age of the World Picture"

1

This course confronts two fifteenth century figures: the polymath Leon Battista Alberti, writer, architect, and ground-breaking theorist of both art and architecture, whose perspectival method, as I will show, in interesting ways looks forward to the method of Descartes, and cardinal Nicholas of Cusa or Cusanus. It is my hope that this confrontation will help us towards a deeper understanding both of the legitimacy of the modern age, the age that Heidegger characterizes as the age of the world picture, and of the poverty that shadows such legitimacy. And perhaps we will also discover at least a hint of the direction in which we must go to find a path that will lead us beyond that poverty. Readings include Alberti's *On Painting*, Nicholas of Cusa's *On Learned Ignorance (De Docta Ignorantia)*, his *Layman (Idiota)* dialogues, and his dialogue *On Not-other (De Li Non Aliud)*. Heidegger's essay, *The Age of the World Picture* will provide a kind of frame or lens that will allow us to bring what matters here into focus. Descartes' *Discourse on Method* lies in the background.

2

To bring what I have in mind a bit more into focus let me turn to a passage from Husserl's *The Crisis of European Sciences*, where Galileo is blamed for replacing the life-world, the world in which we live and perceive, with the world constructed by science. Crucial here is Galileo's appropriation of Plato, an appropriation that invites comparison with the different way Plato was appropriated by Cusanus:

For Platonism the real had a more or less perfect methexis in the ideal. This afforded ancient geometry possibilities of a primitive application to reality. [But] through Galileo's mathematization of nature, nature is idealized under the guidance of the new

mathematics; nature itself becomes — to express it in a modern way — a mathematical manifold.¹

As we shall see, Cusanus refuses to endorse such an understanding of mathematics. He will offer us a very different appropriation of Plato. And such a refusal, I shall argue, is a presupposition of overcoming nihilism.

The elision of the life-world is, I agree with Husserl, characteristic of our modern understanding of reality, shaped as it is by science and technology, and that means by the mathematization of nature.² There is a sense in which Aristotelian medieval science remained closer to the life-world than our modern science and world-understanding. Galileo's world is one of pure quantity. This is not the world of Aristotle; nor is it easily reconciled with the Christian world-view. It is a world knowable to the mathematician, but at some distance from the world revealed by ordinary sense perception. Concerning this world Galileo thus writes in the *Assayer*:

Hence I think that tastes, odors, colors, and so on are no more than mere names as far as the object in which we place them is concerned, and that they reside only in the consciousness. Hence if the-living creature were removed, all these qualities would be wiped away and annihilated.³

The proximity to Descartes requires no comment.

What Husserl deplores in the *Crisis* is, as we shall see, also at stake in Heidegger's understanding of the modern age as "The Age of the World Picture," to which I shall have to return.

3

When looking for the origin of our modern world picture there is, it seems to me, no better place to turn to than the Florence of the beginning of the fifteenth century. So I should perhaps have begun this seminar by showing you an episode from Roberto

¹ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology. An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. and intro. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 23.

² See Karsten Harries, *Wahrheit: Die Architektur der Welt* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2012).

³ Galileo, "The Assayer," trans. S. Drake in *Theories and Opinions of Galileo* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. 274.

Rossellini's *The Age of Cosimo de' Medici*, a film dating from 1972. Its third part focuses on Leon Battista Alberti. Included in that part Rossellini stages a meeting between Alberti and Cusanus, supposed to have taken place in Florence at the time of the Council that fleetingly had seemed to reunite the Eastern and the Western Church in 1439 and continued in that city until 1443. In the film it is the mathematician and doctor Paolo Toscanelli who appears to have brought Cusanus and Alberti together. The scene begins with a brief consideration of some of Toscanelli's achievements as geographer and astronomer. Suggesting his indebtedness to Toscanelli, Cusanus, goes on to sketch some of the key ideas of his *magnum opus*, *On Learned Ignorance*, a book the attentively listening Alberti of the film tells us he has read. In the film's next episode Alberti explains the perspective construction he had put down in *On Painting*. Rossellini thus presents Toscanelli as the mediating figure between the cardinal's cosmological vision of an infinite cosmos and his teaching of the coincidence of opposites, on the one hand, and Alberti's perspective construction, on the other.

The film presents Cosimo de' Medici's Florence as the beginning of a new world, in which money and mathematics gain an altogether new significance. Rossellini thus places us on the threshold of our modern world. In his understanding of this threshold Rossellini shows himself indebted to Marxism. And at least in this case such a Marxist approach focused on the emergence of capitalism has much to recommend itself. Like Cosimo de' Medici, the Alberti of the film appears to have already crossed that threshold.

When I first saw the scene showing Toscanelli, Cusanus, and Alberti engaged in conversation I was a bit surprised. Although long convinced that there must have been meetings between Alberti and Cusanus, there is no documentary evidence for such a meeting. Alberti does not figure much in the secondary literature on Cusanus. There are more references to Cusanus in the literature on Alberti, most importantly perhaps in Giovanni Santinello's *Leon Battista Alberti*, published in Florence in 1962.⁴

⁴ Giovanni Santinello, *Leon Battista Alberti. Una Visione Estetica del Mondo e della vita* (Florence: Sansoni, 1962). See especially the Appendix, "Nicolò Cusano e Leon Battista Alberti: Pensieri sul bello e sull'arte," 265-296. See also Giovanni Santinello, *Introduzione a Niccolò Cusano* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1971; 3rd ed. 1999).

Is there evidence for such a meeting? Before addressing that question, let me say a bit about the lives of each.

Cusanus was very much a man of the world, a world that he saw disintegrating around him, whose center would not hold. Reformation was in the air.⁵ Cusanus saw it as his task counteract the centrifugal forces that threatened to tear Europe apart in so many different ways, where religious issues, national interests, changing economic conditions, all demand our attention. His hope, vain as it turned out, was to help reform the Church so that it would be able to meet the change it faced. His theological and philosophical speculations had no different aim. There is a sense in which in his life he, too, like Descartes, placed *scientia activa et operativa* ahead of *scientia speculativa*, to be sure, not in the Cartesian, but in a religious, and that then meant also in a political sense.

A few facts about his life: Cusanus is one of the few philosophers that demand of those seriously concerned with their thought, that they visit the places with which they were 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 today is best known for its wines and where a hospice he founded, including a chapel, and a significant part of his library survives. His family was apparently quite well to do,⁶ 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 his wishes, was buried in front of the altar of the chapel of the hospice he had founded in his home-town.

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.⁷ We can assume that already in these early years he became acquainted with Rhenish mysticism.

⁵ See Will-Erich Peuckert, *Die Große Wende. Das apokalyptische Saeculum und Martin Luther*, 2 vols. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1948) pp. 501-505.

⁶ Cf. *Acta Cusana. Quellen zur Lebensgeschichte des Nikolaus von Kues*, ed. Erich Meuthen, Bd. I, 1 (Hamburg: Meiner, 1976), Nrs. 2-10, 13.

⁷ Gerd Heinz-Mohr, "Bemerkungen zur Spiritualität der Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben," *Nicolo' Cusano. Agli Inizi del Mondo Moderno*, p. 471.

Cusanus was only 15, already a cleric, when he enrolled in the University of Heidelberg, then a center of nominalism. After perhaps a year,⁸ 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 — eighty 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 both 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 1428⁹ 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 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.¹⁰ The Schism was ended finally only in 1417 by the Council of Constance, which asserting the superiority of such a

⁸ Cf. *Acta Cusana*, Nr. 11, pp. 3-4.

⁹ The invitation was repeated in 1435 and once again rejected.

¹⁰ Cf. Paul E. Sigmund, *Nicholas of Cusa and Medieval Political Thought* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard, 1963), pp. 11-38..

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 its 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 successor 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 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.¹¹ 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"?¹² How could negotiations that Aeneas Sylvius, one of the chroniclers of the Council, "compared unfavorably to drunkards in a tavern,"¹³ 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."¹⁴

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 less remote from Constantinople.¹⁵ 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, first to Ferrara, and then to Florence, due to the plague and financial considerations, those remaining in Basel attempted to reassert that council's authority, suspending the pope and stripping his supporters, including Cusanus, of their ecclesiastical offices.¹⁶

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,

11 Ibid., pp. 221, 227.

12 Ibid., p. 233.

13 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.

14 Sigmund., p. 229.

15 Ibid., p. 228.

16 Ibid., p. 225.

reinforced Cusanus's 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, the epithet "The Hercules of the Eugenians" from Aeneas Sylvius, and Pope Eugene IV's personal support, renewed by his successors Nicholas V, Calixtus III, and Pius II (Aeneas Sylvius). In these years we see Cusanus involved in various attempts to restore unity to Christendom. Still as a member of the Council of Basel, 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. Union seemed in fact to have achieved in Florence in 1439 — although on their return the Greek delegation failed to receive the support necessary to carry out what had been agreed on and more importantly, the fleeting union could not save Constantinople, which fell to the Turks only a few years later, in 1453. And 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 Tyrolians, 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 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 counter-force, 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 the support of Cusanus, 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 vicar-general for the Papal States in 1458.¹⁷ Happy to have Cusanus with him once more, he kept him busy in Rome, although here, too, as later again in Orvieto,¹⁸ 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

¹⁷ Erich Meuthen, *Die letzten Jahre des Nikolaus Cusanus* (Köln und Opladen: Wesstdeutscher Verlag, 1958), p. 28.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 116 - 122.

preparation for a crusade that due to lack of support never materialized, Cusanus had died in Todi on August 11, 1464. His friend Pius II died three days later.¹⁹

In the eulogy for Cusanus that the Italian humanist Johannes Andreas Bussi — 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) — included in the dedicatory epistle to Pope Paul II that accompanied his Apuleius translation (1469), 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.²⁰ This is apparently the first time that we encounter the term "Middle Ages" (*media tempestas*): an epochal threshold has been crossed.²¹

5

Now a few words about Alberti: Here I shall be much briefer. Alberti was born in 1404, in Genoa, son of an exiled Florentine banker. At an early age, when he was only 10 or 11, he went to Padua to attend the school of the humanist Barzizza. In 1421 Alberti enrolled in canon and civil law at the University of Bologna. In 1431 he obtained a minor position at the Papal curia. In 1434 he entered Florence as part of the retinue of Pope Eugene IV. Brunelleschi was just closing the dome of the Cathedral, the most amazing feat of engineering of the age. The atmosphere of the time is well captured by Alberti's Prologue to *On Painting*: a new glorious age seemed to be beginning in Florence that bore comparison with the best the ancients had achieved.

Like Cusanus, Alberti took holy orders, although there is little about his subsequent career that reminds us of this, even though he appears to have lived an exemplary life. He died in Rome in 1472, having established himself as a theorist of art

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 122-125.

²⁰ 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

²¹ See Peuckert, pp. 333-344

and architecture and as an ethical thinker who emphasized not contemplation, but striving, laboring, producing. He himself was active as an architect and an urban planner.

But let me turn now to the evidence that the two met:

6

That Cusanus was indeed interested in Alberti's theory of perspective is shown by the fact that he owned a copy of Alberti's later *Elementa picturae*. And Alberti, too, knew the work of Cusanus: one of his mathematical treatises, *De lunularum quadratura*, derives very directly from a treatise by Cusanus. Their shared interest in mathematics would thus appear to have been one thing that joined Cusanus and Alberti. Their interest in the power of perspective another.

Circumstantial evidence suggests that they must have known each other. Again and again they were in the same places at the same time. First in Padua, where Alberti, born in 1404, had been sent, when he was only 10 or 11, to attend the school of the humanist Gasparino Barzizza, just at the time when Cusanus, three years older, arrived from Heidelberg to attend what was then the leading university in Europe. To be sure, there is no reason to assume that he would have met the young Alberti at that time. Still, it cannot be ruled out altogether: people matured early in those days. Later their paths were to cross again in Ferrara and Florence, then at the Jubilee in Rome in 1450, and especially in the years 1459-1464, when both were residing in Rome.²²

That Cusanus must have met the somewhat younger Alberti is suggested further by the fact that they befriended many of the same people.²³ Most importantly, they were

²² Santinello, *Leon Battista Alberti*, pp. 265-266. In *Leon Battista Alberti. Universal Man of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969) Joan Gadol observes that "In the late 1450's Cusa's home in Rome was a gathering place for men of science like Peurbach, Regiomontanus, and Toscanelli; Alberti must have been a member of this group" (pp. 196-197, fn. 68). See also Ernst Cassirer, *Individual and Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. Mario Domandi (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 50 and Leonardo Olschki, *Die Literatur der Technik und der angewandten Wissenschaften vom Mittelalter bis zur Renaissance* (Leipzig, Florence, Rome, Geneva: Olschki, 1919), pp. 42, 81 and 108.

²³ Among them Enea Silvio Piccolomini, later pope Pius II, Giovanni Andrea de Bussi, Tommaso di Sarzana, who was to become pope Nicholas V, Nicoló Albergati, bishop of Bologna, and Ambrogio Traversari. See Santinello, *Alberti*, p. 266.

both close to Paolo Toscanelli (1397 - 1482), who, a friend also of Brunelleschi, shared their interest in perspective. Toscanelli is now believed to have been the author of a treatise *Della prospettiva* (in the Ricciardi library) that once had been included among Alberti's works. "Cast as a summary, in 'vulgar' Italian, of the key concepts of medieval optics," it was written presumably earlier than *De pictura*.²⁴ Toscanelli also was among those responsible for the revival of interest in geography, more especially in producing more accurate maps, an interest shared by both Cusanus and Alberti. Rossellini's film alludes to the rumor that he was the author of the chart that first encouraged Columbus to seek the East by going west.

That Alberti and Cusanus both dedicated works to Toscanelli, Alberti the *Intercoenales* of 1429, Cusanus his first two geometrical treatises, *De transmutationibus geometricis* of 1450 and *De arithmetis complementis* of the same year, shows the high esteem in which they held the Florentine polymath. Cusanus had first met Toscanelli in Padua. They remained friends and Toscanelli was one of the two doctors at his bedside, when Cusanus died in Todi in 1464. We have Toscanelli's critique of one of Cusanus' mathematical writings; also a little dialogue by Cusanus, *Dialogus de circuli quadratura*, based on a discussion between the two that took place in Brixen in 1457.

7

But why am I even interested in joining Cusanus to Alberti, in looking at the work of the cardinal from the vantage point of Alberti? My reason is, I suspect, not so very different from that which led Rossellini to stage the meeting between the two in his film. I, too, understand Alberti as one of the founders of our modern world, a world whose material wealth is shadowed by spiritual poverty. I understand Cusanus as a thinker who can help us to confront and overcome such poverty.

More specifically, as already indicated, I understand Alberti's *On Painting* as a work that helped inaugurate what Heidegger came to call "The Age of the World Picture." But if such remarks are not to remain perhaps suggestive, but unsupported

²⁴ Hugo Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), p. 71.

assertions I need to say even in this first session a bit more about Heidegger's understanding of this age as "The Age of the World Picture."

Heidegger first gave his lecture "The Age of the World Picture" in 1938. At that time he gave it the title "The Foundation of the Modern World Picture by Metaphysics." That original title invites us to compare the modern world picture with others, possessing presumably different foundations. The original title thus suggests that every age has its own world picture. And can we not ask for the world picture of the Middle Ages or of the Greeks?²⁵ World picture here means something like world-view. The revised title, however, claims something else, claims that the very attempt to understand the world as a picture helps to define our age, hinting at a connection between such an attempt and metaphysics. This suggests that while we moderns may inquire into the world picture of the Middle Ages, the medievals would not have done so. They did not experience their world as a picture in that sense. Just what is at stake here?

The word "picture" hints at a first answer. We can look at pictures, stand before them, but we cannot enter or leave them, cannot dwell in them. Pictures may include representations of persons. In this sense Alberti could say in *On Painting* that pictures allow us to live even after our death. But it is of course not really we who live in such pictures. What we find in them is only a representation, a simulacrum. We cannot live in pictures. Pictures are not like buildings. They are uninhabitable.

This already suggests what is at stake in the phrase: "The Age of the World Picture." To the extent that we understand the world as a picture, we stand before it, have lost our place in it. In such a world we can no longer be said to dwell. In such a world we all tend to become displaced persons, simulacra of human beings.

Such a displacement is presupposed by science. Presupposed is a self-elevation that transforms the embodied self into a disembodied thinker and observer.

I want to claim that Alberti's *On Painting* helped to inaugurate what Heidegger calls the "Age of the World Picture." In his essay, to be sure, Heidegger is not thinking of, indeed does not even mention Alberti. The person who is there said to have inaugurated the "Age of the World Picture" is Descartes (Consider especially p. 127, and

²⁵ Martin Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," *Holzwege, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1977), p. 81.

Appendix 4) But Cartesian method, I would like to suggest, and I shall have to return to this suggestion, is anticipated by *perspectiva artificialis* and involves an analogous loss of transcendence. To anticipate, consider just this similarity: as the Albertian picture assumes an eye placed before and thus outside it, the Cartesian world-picture assumes an I placed before and thus outside it. The Cartesian *res cogitans*, as I pointed out, has thus no place in the world whose essence Descartes determines as *res extensa*. The subject has fallen, had to fall out of the world so understood. Science knows nothing of such a thinking substance, which is yet a presupposition of all science. All science can do is study brain processes and the like. That is to say, science as such knows and can know nothing of persons deserving respect. So understood persons have no place in the scientific world-picture. As Wittgenstein says of this subject in his *Tractatus*:

5.631 ... If I wrote a book 'the world as I found it,' I should also have therein to report my body and say which members obey my will and which do not etc. This then would be a method of isolating the subject or rather of showing that in an important sense there is no subject: that is to say, of it alone in this book mention could not be made.

5.632 The subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world.²⁶

That Wittgenstein, too, should speak of a world picture should come as no surprise (2.19). The subject has fallen out of that world-picture. So, for that matter, as Wittgenstein points out, have values. "In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. In it there is no value — and if there were, it would be of no value" (6.41).

What matters to me here is finally not Cusanus, Alberti or Descartes, is not Heidegger or Wittgenstein, but a picture of the world that has to deny the subject a place in that world. And that world-picture is a presupposition of our science, of its demand for objectivity. It is of course easy to insist that this world-picture should not be confused with the world we actually live in. But the correctness of this observation should not lead us to forget the extent to which our life-world is ever more decisively being transformed by technology. And precisely to this extent, we ourselves are being transformed in the image of the Cartesian subject, becoming ever more free, less bound to particular places, but that means also ever more mobile, rootless, and ghostly.

²⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 151.

2. On The Power and Poverty of Perspective

1

Let me begin by returning to our first session. Why in this seminar am I interested in joining Cusanus to Alberti, in looking at the work of the cardinal from the vantage point of Alberti? My reason, I suggested, is not so very different from that which led Rossellini to stage the meeting between the two in his film, *The Age of Cosimo de' Medici*. I, too, understand Alberti as one of the founders of our modern world, a world whose material wealth is shadowed by spiritual poverty. More specifically, I understand Alberti's *On Painting* as a work that helped inaugurate what Heidegger came to call "The Age of the World Picture." Picture, as I pointed out, is understood here as something produced by the subject, something that has its center in and receives its measure from the subject.²⁷ Heidegger, to be sure, was thinking not of Alberti, but of Descartes and of his promise of a method that would render us humans the masters and possessors of nature. But, as I hope will become clear in the course of this course, in important ways Alberti's perspective construction is a precursor of Cartesian method. To confront Alberti with Cusanus is to invite our age, this "Age of the World Picture," to recognize the poverty that shadows its power, to become learned about its ignorance. But if such remarks are not to remain, perhaps suggestive, but unsupported assertions I need to say more, first of all about Alberti's perspective construction and its significance.

2

Addressed first of all to painters and those interested in understanding the practice of painting, Alberti's theory of perspective teaches us how to create convincing representations of what we see, of what appears as it appears, given a particular point of view. What such painting represents are therefore not the objects themselves, but their inevitably perspective-bound appearances. These appearances have their measure in the perceiving eye.

²⁷ Martin Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," *Holzwege, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1977), pp. 75-113.

It is important here to keep in mind the artificiality of Alberti's construction: To put geometry in the service of his construction, Alberti assumes monocular vision and a flat earth. The violence this does to the way we actually see is evident: normally we see with two, constantly shifting eyes; and Alberti knew of course that our earth is a globe. I shall return to the artificiality of these assumptions. But given his assumptions, it is easy to come up with a proof of the correctness of Alberti's construction. For the sake of achieving a certain mastery of appearances, the perspectival art of Alberti subjects what it presents to a human measure that has itself been subjected to the demand for ease of representation. Alberti's understanding of the art of perspective offers itself thus as a figure of Cartesian method. Perspectival painting prefigures the scientific representation of nature. We are provided with at least a sketch of what was to come in the last of Cusanus's *Idiota* dialogues, *Idiota de Staticis Experimentis*, to which I shall turn in a later session.

3

The theory of perspective, I said, is the theory of how to provide convincing representation of what appears as it appears, given certain assumptions. The insistence on the relativity of appearance is, as we shall see, as characteristic of Alberti as it is of Cusanus. The following passage almost reads as if it could have been written by Cusanus:

It would be well to add to the above statements the opinions of philosophers who affirm that if the sky, the stars, the sea, mountains and bodies should become — should God so will, reduced by half, nothing would be diminished in any part to us. All knowledge of large, small; long, short; high, low; broad, narrow; clear, dark; light and shadow and every similar attribute is obtained by comparison. (54)²⁸

Alberti goes on to give a number of examples, e.g., Aeneas who stands head and shoulders next to other men, but seems like a dwarf next to Polyphemus.

Thus all things are known by comparison, for comparison contains within itself a power which immediately demonstrates in objects, which is more, less, or equal. From which it

²⁸ Page references in Tex to Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. and intro. John R. Spencer (New Haven and London: Yale, 1956).

is said that a thing is large when it is greater than something small and largest when it is greater than something large.

Is there then a natural measure? For us human beings the natural measure is our own human body:

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. (55)

Our accidental size provides us with a measure of all things.

I find this rehabilitation of the sophist Protagoras, sharply criticized by both Plato and Aristotle remarkable.²⁹ A similar reference is found in the *Libri della famiglia* (1433- 34 draft). And curious is that we shall later find the same rehabilitation in Cusanus, who will explicitly defend Protagoras against the critique of Aristotle. There are indeed a number of striking parallels between certain remarks by Alberti and the speculations of the cardinal. I have already suggested that the two must have known each other, where Toscanelli may have played the mediating role, as suggested in Rosselini's film.

Why should there be a relationship between mathematicians and painters. The answer is obvious in Alberti's case. His interest in mathematics is tied to the help it can give the painter in his attempt to master illusion, where the word mastery is meant to suggest two things: to be able to produce convincing illusions, but also to have understood the logic of these illusions. The theory of perspective teaches us about the logic of appearance, of phenomena. In this sense phenomenology would mean the logic of appearances. This is indeed how Kant's contemporary Lambert understood the term. Kant himself was considering calling what was to become the *Critique of Pure Reason* a phenomenology.

In teaching mastery of appearances the theory of perspective allows the artist to become a magician in the sense in which Plato speaks disparagingly of the artist as a magician in Book X of the Republic.

And there is another artist, — I should like to know what you would say of him?

²⁹ See Charles Trinkaus, "Protagoras in the Renaissance: An Exploration," *Philosophy and Humanism: Essays in Honor of Paul Oskar Kristeller*, ed. Edward Mahoney (New York: Columbia U. Press, 1976), pp. 190-213.

Who is he?

One who is the maker of all the works of the other workmen.

What an extraordinary man!

Wait a little, and there shall be more reason for your saying so. For this is he who is able to make not only vessels of every kind, but plants and animals, himself and all other things — the earth and heaven, and the things which are in heaven or under the earth; he makes the gods also.

He must be a wizard and make no mistake.

Oh, you are incredulous, are you? Do you mean that there is no such maker or creator, or that in one sense there might be a maker of all these things but in another not? Do you see that there is a way in which you could make them all yourself?

What way?

An easy way enough; or rather, there are many ways in which the feat might be quickly and easily accomplished, none quicker than that of turning a mirror round and round — you would soon enough make the sun and the heavens, and the earth and yourself, and other animals and plants, and all the other things of which we were just now speaking, in the mirror.³⁰

Brunelleschi, who more than Alberti deserves credit for working out of the theory of perspective, was thought by his contemporaries to have been such a magician. Let me read you here a passage from a 15th century account of his achievement:

He first demonstrated his system of perspective on a small panel, about half a braccio square. He made a representation of San Giovanni in Florence, encompassing as much of that temple as can be seen *at a glance* from the outside.... In order to paint it he seems to have placed himself some three braccia inside the central portal of Santa Maria dei Fiori...

(A description of what is on the panel and of the excellent workmanship follows.)

And he placed burnished silver where the sky had to be represented, so that the real air and atmosphere were reflected it.

(He then drills a hole in the center of the panel and asks the observer to look at it through that whole with the help of a mirror.)³¹

Note that the point of this exercise is to demonstrate the power of the newly discovered system of perspective. On his epitaph in Florence Cathedral Brunelleschi is

³⁰ *Republic X*, 596e-597e, trans. Benjamin Jowett

³¹ Antonio di Tuccio Manetti, "From The Life of Brunelleschi (1480's)," *Brunelleschi in Perspective*, ed. Isabelle Hyman, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1973), pp. 65-66.

said to have excelled in the *Daedalian* art, not only as an architect, but also by virtue of the many machines his genius invented. The artist appears here as a second God.

The reference to Daedalus here invites reflection. Daedalus is a very ambiguous figure. We know him of course as the father of Icarus and the architect of the labyrinth, which made him the archetypal architect. But the story does not begin here: as we learn from Ovid, it begins with a murder: in a jealous rage Daedalus had slain his supremely gifted nephew Perdix, who as a child had invented saw and compass and with whose education Daedalus's sister had entrusted him. The origin of the fall of Icarus lies thus in the fall of Perdix. The latter's fall, however, was not born of his pride, but of Daedalus's unwillingness to tolerate a rival. Forced to flee Athens, Daedalus then became both a builder and a rootless wanderer: the two belong together. I want to underscore the restlessness of Daedalus: Bacon sought the key to the transformation of the world into a labyrinth in the restlessness of the human understanding. The story of Daedalus invites comparison with that of Cain, who in *Genesis* is said to have built the first city. Here, too, rootlessness resulting from a murder is placed at the origin of architecture.

4

But let me turn to Alberti, whose *On Painting* would seem to have been not so much an original achievement as a popularization of Brunelleschi's system.

Alberti begins Book One with a statement clarifying the relationship of his theory of perspective to mathematics.

I will take from the mathematicians those things with which my subject is concerned (43)

He begs the reader not to consider him a mathematician

but as a painter writing of these things. Mathematicians measure with their minds alone the forms of things separated from all matter. Since we wish the object to be seen we will use a more sensible wisdom. (43)

One could trace here the dependence of Alberti on ancient, Arab, and medieval optics (Pseudo-Euclidean optics, Alhazen, Vitellio). What matters, however, is the application of this material.

Alberti then draws a distinction between those qualities of a space that are changed by a change of place and light and those that are not (44). Perhaps we can say

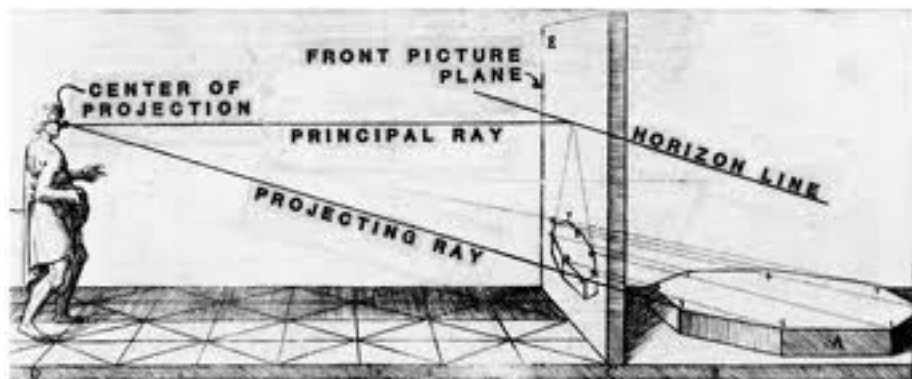
that he drawing a distinction between **the real and the apparent properties of a thing**. The painter is concerned with the latter. But appearance has its own logic. This allows us to have a science of its representation.

Alberti next introduces the idea of a pyramid of sight (46). Interesting is his unwillingness to get bogged down in unnecessary theoretical problems:

Among the ancients there was no little dispute whether these rays came from the eye or the plane. This dispute is very difficult and quite useless to us. It will not be considered.
(46)

He speaks of the rays that connect plane and eye as being like hairs or like a bundle, the eye like a bud. He then draws a distinction between extrinsic rays, defining the outline, median rays, which fill in the area, and the centric ray which is perpendicular to the plane. The more acute the angle in the eye, the smaller the object will appear. The greater the distance of some given object the smaller the angle. He adds a note on aerial perspective. He suggests that humidity of the air tires the rays, so we see things as in a haze.

Alberti then suggests that the picture plane be considered as if it were made of transparent glass. The picture comes to be thought of as very much like a *window*.



From this conception follows the crucial rule from which much of the following can be deduced:

Let us add the axiom of the mathematicians where it is proved that if a straight line cuts two sides of a triangle, and if this line which forms a triangle is parallel to a side of the first and greater triangle, certainly this lesser triangle will be proportional to the greater.
(52)

But let us turn now to the construction itself

First of all about where I draw. I inscribe a quadrangle of right angles, as large as I wish, which is to be considered an open window through which I see what I want to paint. Here I determine as it pleases me the size of the man in my picture.

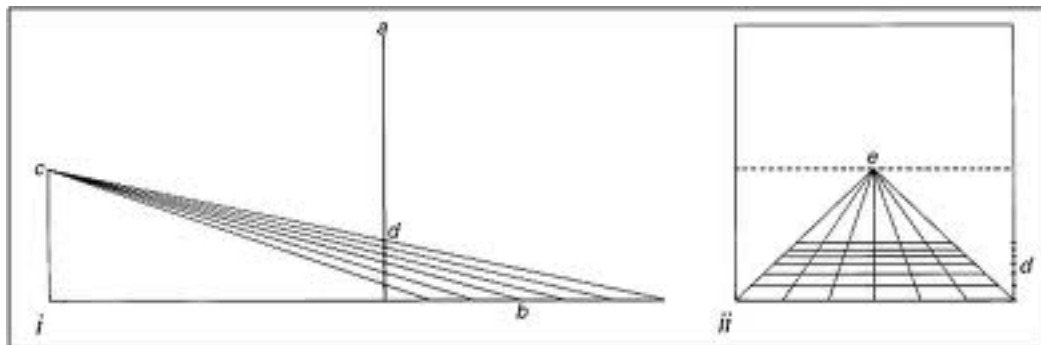
I divide the length of this man in three parts. These parts to me are proportional to that measurement called a braccio, for, in measuring the average man, it is seen that he is about three braccia.

With these braccia I divide the base line of the rectangle into as many parts as it will receive. To me this base line of the quadrangle is proportional to the nearest and equidistant quantity on the pavement.

Then, within this quadrangle, where it seems best to me, I make a point which occupies the place where the central ray strikes. For this is called the centric point.

This point is properly placed when it is no higher from the base line than the height of the man that I have to paint there. (The diagram on p. 110 places that point improperly.)

The centric point being located as I said, I draw straight lines from it to each division placed on the base line of the quadrangle. These drawn lines, (extended) as if to infinity, demonstrate to me how each transverse quantity is altered visually. (56)



Alberti then discusses briefly a false construction, apparently common in his day: a second parallel (b) is drawn to a line a, the distance divided into thirds, a third parallel (c), $2/3$ of the distance between a and b above b, and so on.

Know that a painted thing can never appear truthful where there is no definite distance for seeing it. (56)

Note that what the artist should strive for **is not truth, but the appearance of truth**. But to return to the construction: how does Alberti draw his transverse lines:

I take a small space in which I draw a straight line and this I divide into parts similar to those in which I divided the base line of the quadrangle. Then placing a point at a height equal to that of the centric point from the base line, I draw lines from this point to each division scribed on the first line. Then I establish as I wish the distance from the eye to the picture. Here I draw, as the mathematicians say, a perpendicular cutting whatever

lines it finds... The succession of this perpendicular line with the others gives me the succession of transverse quantities. In this fashion I find described all the parallels, that is the squared braccia of the pavement in the painting. (57)

To check whether you have done the construction correctly there is an easy test:

If one straight line contains the diagonal of several quadrangles describe in the picture, it is an indication to me whether they are drawn correctly enough. (57)

This provides an alternative method of construction. Note that every painting with a pavement in it gives you an easy recipe for deciding where to stand.

The construction provides the painter with a matrix in which objects can then be located. This space is essentially homogeneous; it is indeed the visual appearance of the objective space of the new science. Note the arbitrariness of point of view. The body does provide Alberti with something like a measure. We should think back to his reference to Protagoras. The perspective construction of Alberti is essentially anthropocentric. This anthropocentrism is subject to criticism by those who demand a theocentric art.

Let me ask one last question: how does the representation of space relate to the space we actually see. The construction assumes monocular vision. And it assumes a stationary eye. Remember that Manetti in his account of Brunelleschi's first demonstration of the theory emphasizes that Brunelleschi decided to paint only what could be seen at a glance. The importance of this becomes clear when you think of painting a very tall building, say the Tower of Babel. According to Alberti it would seem that the different stories, assuming equal height, would all have to be given the same size, although this is of course not the way we see them. But this only illustrates that there is a lot of motion of eyes and head involved in everyday experience, and every such movement means a shift of the centric point. For the sake of achieving his illusions the painter simplifies experience.

In conclusion I would like to emphasize once more the connection between Alberti's perspective construction and the Protagorean dictum that man is the measure of all things. The art of Alberti subjects what it presents to a human measure. But in this respect it is not too different from perceived appearance.

Next time I shall turn to the tension between such an anthropocentric conception of art and the inherited, still medieval, theocentric understanding of art; and to the ontological; implications of such tension.

9

I suggested that Alberti helped to inaugurate the age of the world-picture, that his perspectival method foreshadows that of Descartes. Having said this, it is important to note that there are decisive differences between the picture Alberti had in mind and Heidegger's world-picture. The former is a work of art. It seeks to represent the appearance of just some small part of the world, perhaps just a fiction. And it seeks to represent it in such a way that a whole is created that by its perfection, its apparent self-sufficiency, enthralls us in a way that for a time lets us forget the real world. The artwork allows us a vacation from reality. It provides for innocent pleasures that let us forget the cares and concerns that bind us to reality. In this respect Alberti's *On Painting* anticipates the self-sufficiency of the artwork that the art for art's sake approach to art came to insist on. So understood art turns its back on reality and on truth.

Heidegger's world-picture, on the other hand, does not turn its back on reality. Quite the opposite: it aims at a representation of the world that would include everything that deserves to be called real. For that very reason, it invites us to mistake this picture of the world with the world itself. The world-picture thus transforms itself into something like a house, into a building. A building with no outside, however: a prison perhaps? In this world-picture there is no room for persons as beings deserving respect. They fall out of the world picture that increasingly determines the shape of the world we live in. For that reason it is important to reflect on the origin of that picture and on what supports it, also on what kind of experiences and considerations might allow us to step beyond it. At stake is nothing less than our own humanity.

3. Platonic and Theological Reservations

1

As I pointed out last time, Alberti's perspective construction brings to mind the painter criticized in Book X of the *Republic*. What such a painter creates are of course only imitations of appearances, which according to Plato, are themselves but copies of the forms. But despite his critique of artistic representation, it was Plato who came to dominate aesthetic speculation in the Middle Ages.

In the transmission of Platonic ideas perhaps the two most important figures are Plotinus and St. Augustine. Fundamental to Plotinus' thinking, too, is the Platonic antithesis between **matter** and **form**. Matter is associated with temporality, darkness, chaos, the indefinite, the measureless or **apeiron**. Form is associated with the permanent and abiding. Form makes definite and thus reveals. Plotinus gives particularly clear expression to what we can term the Platonic definition of the beautiful: beauty is, as the medievals put it, **splendor formae**, the becoming visible of the form.

Plotinus' proximity to Plato is evident in the following passages:

Our interpretation is that the Soul — by the very truth of its nature, by its affiliation to the noblest Existents in the hierarchy of Being — when it sees anything of that kin, or any trace of that kinship, thrills with an immediate delight, takes its own to itself, and thus stirs anew to the sense of its nature and of all its affinity.³²

Plotinus, too, places the true home of the soul at the top of the hierarchy of being. Our temporal existence places us at a distance from that home, longing to return to it. Life could be seen as a journey in search of our lost home. As the poet Novalis put it: Where are we going? Always home. On this journey we meet with traces or figures of that home. All that is beautiful presents itself to us as such a trace. As Plotinus puts this point:

We hold that all the loveliness of this world comes by communion in Ideal-Form.

All shapelessness whose kind admits of pattern and form, as long as it remains outside of Reason and Idea, is ugly by that very isolation from the Divine Thought. And this is the Absolute Ugly: an ugly thing is something that has not been entirely mastered

³² *Ennead* I, 6, 2, trans. Stephen McKenna,

by pattern, that is by Reason, the Matter not yielding at all points and in all respects to Ideal-Form.³³

Beauty is tied here to the imposition of a formal order. A passage from Plato's *Philebus* comes to mind, where Plato almost seems to be thinking of the abstract art of a painter like Mondrian.

The beauty of figures which I am now trying to indicate is not what most people would understand as such, not the beauty of a living creature or a picture; what I mean, what the arguments points to, is something straight, or round, and the surfaces and solids which a lathe, or a carpenter's rule and square, produces from the straight and the round. I wonder if you understand. Things like that, I maintain, are beautiful not, like most things, in a relative sense; they are always beautiful in their very nature; and they carry pleasures peculiar to themselves which are quite unlike the pleasures of scratching. And there are colors too which have this characteristic.³⁴

We can speak perhaps of a **perennial Platonism** in the history of art, whose turn to abstraction should be contrasted with the pursuit of lifelike illusion., where Plato praises the beauty of geometric forms and mechanically produced volumes.

Consider this passage from Plotinus:

But where the Ideal-Form has entered, it has grouped and co-ordinated what from a diversity of parts was to become a unity: it has rallied confusion into co-operation: it has made the sum one harmonious coherence: for the Idea is a unity and what it moulds must come to unity as far as multiplicity may.

And on what has thus been compacted to unity, Beauty enthrones itself, giving itself to the parts as to the sum: when it lights on some natural unity, a thing of like parts, then it gives itself to that whole. Thus, for an illustration, there is beauty, conferred by craftsmanship, of all a house with all its parts, and the beauty which some natural quality may give to a single stone.

This, then, is how the material thing becomes beautiful — by communicating in the thought that flows from the Divine.³⁵

That the soul has its home with the forms is a theme that we encounter in Plato's *Phaedrus*. Beauty calls and guides us back to this home. Recall the ascent from beautiful particulars to the invisible form of beauty of which Diotima speaks in the

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ *Philebus*, 51c, tr. R. Hackforth.

³⁵ *Ennead* I, 6, 2

Symposium. Plotinus recalls that view when he has beauty play a part in a process of purification.

So, we may justly say, a soul becomes ugly — by something foisted upon it, by sinking itself into the alien, by a fall, a descent into body, into Matter. The dishonor of the Soul is in its ceasing to be clean and apart. Gold is degraded when it is mixed with earthly particles; if these be worked out, the gold is left and is beautiful, isolated from all that is foreign, gold with gold alone. And so the Soul; let it be but cleared of the desires that come by its too intimate converse with the body, emancipated from all the passions, purged of all that embodiment has thrust upon it, withdrawn, a solitary, to itself again — in that moment the ugliness that came only from the alien is stripped away.³⁶

Very much in keeping with what Plato had taught in the *Symposium*, Plotinus, too, distinguishes a higher beauty, transcending time and the senses, from a lower, temporal and sensible beauty. The parallels are obvious:

And one that shall know this vision — with what passion of love shall he not be seized, with what pang of desire, what longing to be molten into one with This, what wondering delight! If he that has never seen this Being must hunger for It as for all his welfare, he that has known must love and reverence It as the very Beauty; he will be flooded with awe and gladness, stricken by a salutary terror; he loves with a veritable love, with sharp desire; all other loves than this he must despise, and disdain all that once seemed fair.

This, indeed, is the mood even of those who, having witnessed the manifestation of Gods or Supernals, can never again feel the old delight in the comeliness of material forms: what then are we to think of one that contemplates Absolute Beauty in Its essential integrity, no accumulation of flesh and matter, no dweller on earth or in the heavens — so perfect Its purity — far above all such things in that they are nonessential, composite, not primal but descending from This?³⁷

Even more decisively than the *Symposium* Plotinus's discussion of beauty tends towards mystical experience:

But what must we do? Where lies the path? How come to vision of the inaccessible Beauty, dwelling as if in consecrated precincts, apart from the common ways where all may see, even the profane?

He that has the strength, let him arise and withdraw into himself, foregoing all that is known by the eyes, turning away for ever from the material beauty that once made his joys. When he perceives those shapes of grace that shown in body, let him not pursue:

³⁶ *Enneads* I, 6, 5.

³⁷ *Enneads* I, 6, 7.

he must know them for copies, vestiges, shadows, and hasten away towards That they tell of. For if anyone follow what is, like a beautiful shape playing over water — is there not a myth telling in symbol of such a dupe, how he sank into the depth of the current and was swept away to nothingness? So, too, one that is held by material beauty and will not break free shall be precipitated, not in body but in Soul, down to the dark depth loathed by Intellective-Being, where, blind even in the Lower world, he shall have commerce only with shadows, there as here.³⁸

2

I call your attention especially to the Narcissus myth that Plotinus here alludes to, since Alberti refers the reader to the same myth, calling Narcissus the inventor of painting:

For this reason, I say among friends that Narcissus who was changed into a flower, according to the poets, was the inventor of painting. Since painting is already the flower of every art, the story of Narcissus is most to the point. What else can you call painting, but a similar embracing with art of what is presented on the surface of the water in the fountain. (64)

But why should Alberti want to claim Narcissus as his precursor?³⁹

To call him the inventor of painting would seem to cast the art of painting in a very questionable light. Ovid, one of "the poets" of whom Alberti must have been thinking, although he speaks of "the poets," in the plural, describes Narcissus as a young man of extraordinary beauty, possessed by a pride that refused love, until one of those he scorned prayed to heaven that he, too, might feel the pain of unrequited love; punished by Nemesis, Narcissus fell in love with his own reflected image; slowly consumed by this love he was transformed into the flower we call "narcissus."

Alberti's use of the Narcissus story invites us to seek the origin of painting not just in love, but in an inversion of love brought about by pride. But can this be how Alberti would have his readers understand his remark? To locate the origin of art in pride hardly

³⁸ *Enneads* 6, 1, 8.

³⁹ Cf. Karsten Harries, "Narcissus and Pygmalion," *Philosophy and Art. Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*, ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom, (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991), pp. 53-72.

seems to serve Alberti's stated purpose: to prove that "painting is not unworthy of consuming all our time and study."⁴⁰ How does Alberti understand that worth?

If we take him by his word, the worth of painting would seem linked to its self-sufficiency: to say that it is not unworthy of taking up all of our time, is to suggest that the pursuit of art need not serve other activities, for if so, could it ever be worthy of taking up all of our time? For the sake of art, Alberti seems to suggest, we may suspend all other concerns. To be sure, I may be placing too much weight on what would seem to be no more than a casual remark made in passing; just like the anecdotal reference to Narcissus, it seems no more than a rhetorical aside, hyperbolic, as such asides tend to be, certainly not weighty enough to warrant the kind of literal approach I am imposing on it. But just such rhetorical asides, where the author relaxes a bit, often reveal his deepest concerns better than his central argument.

As stated, Alberti's statement of purpose gestures in a direction that would have to have troubled a more traditional Christian thinker. Just as Narcissus has denaturalized eros, the person who allows art to take up all of his time would seem to have strayed from his natural end. With Kierkegaard one could speak here of a teleological suspension of the ethical, although what is suspended here is not just the ethical, but the religious. Such suspension is indeed inseparable from the pursuit of art for art's sake. As Kierkegaard knew, there is something demonic about such suspension; and there is something demonic about dedicating one's whole life to art.

I would like to call special attention to Alberti's claim that art is not unworthy of consuming all our time. Art apparently is capable of consuming, i.e., of abolishing time. Do we get here a hint of the worth of painting as Alberti understands it? Is its dignity linked to its ability to defeat, or perhaps only to let us forget, if only for a time, the tyrannical rule of time? As Schopenhauer insists, in time aesthetic experience promises to lift the burden of time.

But let me return to the traditional understanding of the tale of Narcissus as a tale of pride subverting the natural order. That Alberti is aware of this reading, a reading that has to invite criticism, is suggested when he tells the reader that he tells his playful

⁴⁰ Alberti, *On Painting*, p. 63.

determination of the origin of painting only to his friends (where the reader being let in on the secret, is thereby included in Alberti's circle of friends).

Giving voice to the artistic revolution that overthrew medieval art, Alberti's *On Painting* helps mark the beginning of the aesthetic approach to beauty and art that has helped shape the development of art ever since. Alberti's mention of Narcissus forces us to question this approach's ruling ethos: should we locate the origin of Renaissance and Post-Renaissance art in love, but more precisely in that inversion of love brought about by pride of which Ovid's tale tells?

Consider once more Alberti's remark:

...I say among my friends that Narcissus who was changed into a flower, according to the poets, was the inventor of painting. Since painting is already the flower of every art, the story of Narcissus is most to the point.

Narcissus was changed into a flower. As we read in Ovid:

The pyre, the tossing torches, and the bier, were now being prepared, but his body was nowhere to be found. Instead of his corpse, they discovered a flower with a circle of white petals round a yellow center.⁴¹

It is significant that Narcissus was changed not just into a flower, but into the flower that now bears his name. As a matter of fact, the myth of Narcissus may well represent a response to the flower, which loves the water and turns its head downward. The flower also helps to explain the parentage of the mythical Narcissus, whose father is Cephisus, god of the main river of Boeotia, while his mother is called Liriope, because the narcissus was considered a kind of lily (*leirion*). The myth, it has been argued, offers us an extended figure of the flower known in antiquity not only for its beauty, which returns every spring, but for its numbing odor. The flower was thus also associated with fainting and death.

If the ancients associated the flower with both beauty and death, these associations return in the mythical figure of the beautiful Narcissus, who in antiquity was considered a symbol of death.⁴² The images of Narcissus on grave monuments suggest

⁴¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, tr. and int. Mary M. Innes (Harmondsworth; Penguin, 1955), p. 87.

⁴² Friedrich Wieseler, *Narkissos* (Göttingen: Verlag der Dieterischen Buchhandlung, 1856), p. 9.

that Narcissus was not only understood as an incarnation of pride, but more positively, as a symbol of a metamorphosis that offers consolation for the pain inflicted by the terror of time. Narcissus' metamorphosis into a flower rescues him from total annihilation and grants him a semblance of immortality.

The flower is the metamorphosed Narcissus, we can say his metaphor. In this metaphor Narcissus continues to live. Thus his final wish is granted after all. I quote Ovid's Narcissus:

I am cut off in the flower of my youth. I have no quarrel with death, for in death I shall forget my pain: but I could wish that the object of my love might outlive me. As it is, both of us will perish together, when this one life is destroyed.⁴³

The wish is paradoxical: while ready to die, Narcissus yet wishes that the object of his love might outlive him; but that object is of course he himself. Narcissus accepts death and yet wishes for continued life. And this paradoxical wish for life in death is granted. As the flower he has become, Narcissus is reborn every spring and thus rescued from total destruction.

Note that this reading invites an interpretation of the flower as a figure of painting. "By embracing with art what is presented on the surface of the fountain," -- these are Alberti's words, — the artist gives it permanence, allows the mirror image to remain when its original has long ceased to be. Is this then part of Alberti's reason for invoking Narcissus? Is art the ambiguous figure of both death and the victory over death, a victory the artist does not owe to nature, or to God, but to his own skill?

Once more consider the line: "What else can you call painting but a similar embracing with art of what is presented on the surface of the fountain." The artist does not just re-present what he sees in the mirror, he embraces it, where we should recall that just this was denied to Narcissus. The artist may thus be said to succeed where Narcissus failed. The offspring of that embrace is the work of art. Art allows the narcissistic eros to become procreative after all.

⁴³ Ovid, p. 86.

Alberti's artist embraces these appearances with his art and thereby grants them permanence. This embrace allows him to escape the proud self-isolation of Narcissus. The products of the painter's pride meet with the community's grateful acceptance. "Any master painter," Alberti suggests, "who sees his work adored will feel himself considered another god."⁴⁴ "In painting animals" Zeuxis is said to have set "himself up almost as a god."⁴⁵ Like Plato, Alberti, too, understands the artist as a maker of the gods, citing the authority of Trismegistus, who is supposed to have said the "mankind portrays the gods in his own image from his memories of nature and his own origins."⁴⁶ "Nothing," Alberti adds, "has ever been so esteemed by mortals."⁴⁷

Socrates would have insisted that what is here being esteemed are only imitations of appearances. Alberti, of course, would not have disputed that. But why then should painting be so valued by mortals. The word "mortals" hints at the answer: Alberti observes that "Painting contains a divine force which not only makes absent men present, as friendship is said to do, but moreover makes the dead seem almost alive. Even after many centuries they are recognized with great pleasure and with great admiration for the painter."⁴⁸ And a bit later: "Thus the face of a man who is already dead certainly lives a long life through painting."⁴⁹ Alberti thus places painting in opposition to death. It has its origin in that ill will against time Nietzsche calls the spirit of revenge. That ill will bids human beings translate themselves out of time. Art, as Alberti understands it, effects such a translation.

Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this ill will against time is a refusal of the authority of eros. The tale of Narcissus has its origin in such a refusal. It is significant that the tale began with a perversion of eros, with a rape. The mother of Narcissus, Ovid tells us, "was the nymph whom Cephisus once embraced with his

⁴⁴ Alberti, *On Painting*, p. 64.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 65.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 65.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

curving stream, imprisoned in his waves, and forcefully ravished."⁵⁰ The sexual act here is divorced from love. We understand why the unwanted offspring of such violence should refuse the nymph Echo's aggressive advances, why his "soft young body housed a pride to unyielding that none of those boys or girls dared to touch him."⁵¹ Refusing all embraces, Narcissus would rather die than allow himself to be touched. In the end of course even proud Narcissus cannot escape love and love demands an object beyond the self. Narcissus finds that object in the mirrored reflection of his own beauty."

I am on fire with love for my own self. It is I who kindle the flames which I must endure. What should I do? Woo or be wooed? But what then shall I seek by my wooing? What I desire, I have. My very plenty makes me poor. How I wish that I could separate myself from my body! A new prayer this, for a lover, to wish the thing he loves away! Now grief is sapping my strength; little life remains for me — I am cut off in the flower of my youth. I have no quarrel with death, for in death I shall forget my pain: but I could wish that the object of my love might outlive me: as it is, both of us will perish together when this one life is destroyed."⁵²

Narcissus says of himself that he has what he desires. He thus would seem to embody that state of plenitude of the circle-men of whom Aristophanes speaks in Plato's *Symposium*. Just as Ovid's tale links the plight of Narcissus to his pride, so it was the pride of these circlemen that provoked the punishment of Zeus.

The self-embrace for which Narcissus longs would mean the impossible recovery of a plenitude denied by our fragmented self. Recognizing the impossibility, yet refusing to let go of his dream, Narcissus makes his peace with death. But Narcissus is not quite ready to renounce life altogether. He wants both: to be and not to be. This contradictory longing lets him wish that the object of his love, his own fleeting image in the pool, might outlast him. Narcissus knows that this is a vain wish. The mirror image will perish together with what it mirrors. But Alberti could have consoled Narcissus: art is able to give permanence to what has only fleeting existence in the mirror. It allows the beauty of Narcissus to survive, unsullied by a love that would embrace to give birth.

⁵⁰ Ovid. *Metamorphoses*, III p. 83.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., p. 86

4

With his appropriation of the Narcissus myth Alberti seems to turn his back on Plotinus, whose downgrading of sensible beauty and therefore also of art would seem to be at least as decisive as Plato's.

Now it must be seen that the stone thus brought under the artist's hand to the beauty of form is beautiful not as stone — for so the crude block would be as pleasant — but in virtue of the Form or Idea introduced by the art. This form is not in the material; it is in the designer before ever it enters into the stone; and the artificer holds it not by his equipment of eyes and hands, but by his participation in his art. The beauty, therefore, exists in a far higher state in the art; for it does not come over integrally into the work; that original beauty is not transferred; what comes over is a derivative and a minor: and even that shows itself upon the statue not integrally and with entire realization of intention, but only in so far as it has subdued the resistance of the material.⁵³

And yet Plotinus shows himself more generous to art than many passages suggest:

Still the arts are not to be slighted on the ground that they create by imitation of natural objects; for, to begin with, these natural objects are themselves imitations; then, we must recognize that they give no bare reproduction of the thing seen, but go back to the Reason-Principles from which Nature itself derives, and, furthermore, that much of their work is all their own; they are holders of beauty and add where nature is lacking. Thus Pheidias wrought the Zeus upon no model among things of sense but by apprehending what form Zeus must take if he chose to become manifest to sight.⁵⁴

The beauty of the work of art is like the beauty of the appearing God. Once again beauty is understood as an epiphany of the divine.

5

Neo-Platonism gave to Christianity its conception of the beautiful, although the translation into the Christian context gives is a richness that it had not possessed before. Both accounts presuppose a conception of the human being as essentially removed from his true home. Platonism interprets this removal in terms of our temporal condition, which alienates us human beings from that realm of being which is our true home. Every beautiful thing, I suggested, is a metaphor, a figure of that true home. The Christian

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Enneads, 5, 8, 1.

understanding of the fall invites a very different interpretation of the way human beings are removed from their essence. The original state from which we humans have fallen is now identified with that blissful state in which Adam and Eve found themselves in paradise before pride led them into transgression. Important in this connection is that even before the fall Adam and Eve had a body and existed in time. Similarly the terrestrial and temporal can be redeemed and changed back into a paradise-like state. The idea of paradise lost has its counterpart in paradise regained. The second Adam, Christ, spirit become flesh, can undo the consequences of the sin of the first, binding once more matter to spirit, soul to body, thus healing the split that now divides human being as the result of Adam and Eve's original disobedience. With its emphasis on the incarnation, on the resurrection of the body, that is to say on the redemption of the flesh, orthodox Christianity had to arrive at a more positive evaluation of the senses than the Platonic tradition, which makes it difficult to redeem the body. The Christian conception of the ideal state is not as exclusively spiritual as the Platonic. Thus St. Augustine assures us:

But when the soul has properly adjusted and disposed itself, and has rendered itself harmonious and beautiful, then will it venture to see God, the very source of all truth and the very Father of Truth. O great God, What kind of eyes shall those be! How pure! How beautiful! How powerful! How constant! How serene! How blessed! And what is that which they can see? What should we believe? What should we say? Everyday expressions present themselves, but they have been rendered sordid by things of least worth. I shall say no more than that to us is promised a vision of beauty — the beauty of whose imitation all other things are beautiful, and by comparison with which all other things are unsightly.⁵⁵

Beauty on earth gives us a figure of the beauty of heaven. As it recalls the beauty Adam and Eve saw in paradise, so it prefigures the beauty that the saved shall see in paradise regained. Every thing, and especially every beautiful thing, points in these directions: to the past, to the future, and to that heaven that transcends time. This figural conception of beauty was summarized by Alan of Lille in his famous hymn to the rose dating from the twelfth century:

Omnis mundi creatura

⁵⁵ *De Ordine*, 11, 18, 51.

Quasi liber et pictura
 Nobis est, et speculum
 Nostrae vitae, nostrae mortis
 Nostri status, nostrae sortis
 Fidele signaculum.⁵⁶

“All the created things that make up the world are like a book, a picture, or a mirror to us, the truthful sign of our life, death, condition, and destiny.” Things are said to speak to us of what matters in our life. Artists intercept and interpret that speech.

The simile likening the world to a book must be taken seriously. According to the medieval view God is the author of **two** books. One of them is Holy Scripture, the other Nature. Both books speak to us of our condition and destiny, but they do so not transparently, but in figures, in metaphors. Thus both books demand interpretation. Art, on this view, is by its very nature interpretation. It possesses a hermeneutic function.

Consider, e.g. the word "Jerusalem." First of all it refers us to a particular city with a specific history. This is its literal or historical sense. But to a medieval listener "Jerusalem" also means the Church: the community of believers. This is its allegorical sense. But this does not exhaust its meaning, for the historical Jerusalem was understood to prefigure the Heavenly City that is the destiny of the faithful. The medievals spoke of its anagogical meaning. And Jerusalem was also understood as a figure of the individual soul. This was called its tropological meaning. Medieval art cannot be adequately understood without some understanding of these meanings.

But not only the Bible has these dimensions of meaning. Everything we encounter was thought to possess a spiritual significance that invites interpretation. Take for example a pearl. According to some medieval accounts the pearl originates when lightning strikes the shell. So understood it becomes an obvious figure of the Virgin. It is this spiritual perspective that governs medieval art, per-spective in that literal sense that it invites us to see through the sensible appearance to its spiritual significance.

What stands between us and such a view is the characteristically modern emphasis on univocal speech, the privileging of the simple and literal meaning of the text. Given such an understanding it seems odd to say that things speak to us or that nature is a

⁵⁶ Alanus de Insulis, “Rhythmus alter, quo graphice natura hominis fluxa et caduca depingiutur, in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Paris:Migne, 1855), 210: 579.

book. Such talk would seem to be no more than an anthropomorphizing metaphor. I would suggest, however, that even if the medieval interpretation of the spiritual significance of things lies behind us and if we can no longer take seriously a view that argues that Scripture provides us with an authoritative key to the decoding of the hidden meanings of things, these meanings still speak to us and remain active in the words that name us. Take a word like "pearl" or "rose." And there are still thinkers who, like Freud or Bachelard, can teach us to decode the significance of things. And there is still art and poetry that interprets these meanings for us. We are still not done with an understanding of art as an essentially hermeneutic enterprise.

6

It is easy to understand Jacques Maritain when he mourns the rise of Renaissance art based on the newly gained mastery of perspective:

When on visiting an art gallery one passes from the rooms of the primitives to those in which the glories of oil painting and of a much more considerable material science are displayed, the foot takes a step on the floor, but the soul takes a deep fall. It had been taking the air of the everlasting hills — it now finds itself on the floor of a theater — a magnificent theater. With the sixteenth century the lie installed itself into painting.⁵⁷

Artful pictorial illusion invites us to mistake it for reality and to forget its merely artificial being. Artifice substitutes simulacra for reality, as the artist usurps the place of God, substituting for God's creation his own. Maritain would thus have us consider the single step that carries us from the rooms of the primitives to those holding the masters of the Renaissance as a crossing of the threshold that separates anthropocentric modernity from the theocentric Middle Ages.

That Alberti has already crossed this threshold is shown by his rejection of the use of gold in painting.

There are some who use much gold in their istoria. They think it gives majesty. I do not praise it. Even though one should paint Virgil's Dido whose quiver was of gold, her golden hair knotted with gold, and her purple robe girdled with pure gold, the reins of the horse and everything of gold, I should not wish gold to be used, for there is more admiration for the painter who imitates the rays of gold with colors. (85)

⁵⁷ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism, and the Frontiers of Poetry*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Scribner, 1962), p. 52.

To understand what is at issue here we should consider the significance of the gold background that was introduced into Western painting just before 1000. Perhaps the only artistic innovation of comparable importance was the stained glass window: together they furnished medieval art with two critical metaphors — “critical” in the sense that they allow us to approach the essence of this art. The gold background has metaphorical power, hints at eternal blessedness, as it helps to establish the timeless significance of representations drawn from the mundane. It invites us to look at what we see from a "spiritual perspective." I am using this expression, borrowed from Friedrich Ohly, deliberately.⁵⁸ Alberti's perspective invites us to look through the material painting as if it were transparent, a window through which we can see whatever the painter has chosen to represent. But this is very much a human perspective, which has its center in the observer: what we see is appearance for us. The spiritual perspective of medieval art would have us look through the painting in a very different sense: through the material to its spiritual significance. Alberti's art is incompatible with this spiritual perspective. A God-centered art gives way to a subject-centered art. The turn to perspective here means a loss of transcendence. And the same can be said of what Heidegger calls “The Age of the World Picture.”

⁵⁸ Friedrich Ohly, *Schriften zur mittelalterlichen Bedeutungsforschung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977), pp. 15, 35-37.

4. Alberti and “The Age of the World Picture”

1

Today I want to relate Alberti’s perspective construction to what Heidegger called “The Age of the World Picture,” the title of an essay that Heidegger included in a collection of essays to which he gave the title *Holzwege*, which could be translated as “Wood Paths” or “Paths that Lead Nowhere.” In that collection it immediately follows “The Origin of the Work of Art,” the very first essay.⁵⁹

Let me begin with Heidegger’s fivefold characterization of the age of the world picture.

1. It has its foundation in metaphysics.
2. Today metaphysics finds its most visible expression in technology. Here it can be said to have triumphed.
3. An aesthetic understanding of the work of art corresponds to this triumph.
4. Related is an understanding of culture as the preservation and cultivation of what are taken to be the highest values.
5. And finally Heidegger speaks of *Entgötterung*. That is to say, our understanding of reality no longer has a place for God, or gods, or the divine.

As I pointed out, I do not consider this an altogether adequate description of our age. In everyone’s experience there is much that does not fit Heidegger’s characterization. What he offers us is no more than a simple model that focuses on certain key aspects of the world we live in. Or, we can say, what he offers us is a caricature. But like any good caricature it captures something essential and disturbing. What makes it disturbing is precisely the violence his age of the world-picture does to much we consider important.

⁵⁹ Cf. Karsten Harries, “Weltbild und Welttheater: Staunen, Schauen, Wissen,” *Kunstammer, Laboratorium, Bühne Schauplätze des Wissens im 17. Jahrhundert*, ed. Helmar Schramm, Ludger Schwarte, Jan Lazardzig (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 2003), pp. 521-540.

But his caricature would not be found disturbing if it did not capture something essential about our world. If it did not do so, we would simply dismiss it.

Bracketing such concerns for the time being, the place Heidegger's sketch would assign to art seems clear enough. In this "Age of the World-Picture," Heidegger too suggests, the work of art comes to be understood first of all as an aesthetic object.

But just what does Heidegger have in mind when he calls our age "The Age of the World Picture"? Heidegger first gave this lecture in 1938. At that time he gave it the title "The Foundation of the Modern World Picture by Metaphysics." That original title invites us to compare the modern world picture with others, possessing presumably different foundations. The original title thus suggests that every age has its own world picture. And can we not ask for the world picture of the Middle Ages or of the Greeks?⁶⁰ World picture here means something like world-view. The revised title, however, claims something else, claims that the very attempt to understand the world as a picture helps to define our age, hinting at a connection between such an attempt and metaphysics. This suggests that while we moderns may inquire into the world picture of the Middle Ages, the medievals would not have done so. They did not experience their world as a picture. Just what is at stake?

The word "picture" hints at a first answer. We can look at pictures, stand before them, but we cannot enter or leave them, cannot live or dwell in them. Pictures may include representations of persons. In this sense Alberti could say that pictures allow us to live even after our death. But it is of course not really we who live in such pictures. What we find in them is only a representation, a simulacrum. We cannot live in pictures. Pictures are not like buildings. They are uninhabitable.

This already suggests what is at stake in the phrase: "The Age of the World Picture." To the extent that we understand the world as a picture, we stand before it, have lost our place in it. In such a world we can no longer be said to dwell. In such a world we all tend to become displaced persons.

Heidegger points out that such a displacement is presupposed by science. Presupposed is a transformation of the embodied self into a disembodied thinker and

⁶⁰ Martin Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," in *Holzwege, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1977), p. 81.

observer. And something like this transformation of the embodied self into a Cartesian *res cogitans* lies at the very origin of philosophy and that is to say also at the origin of science. The scientist wants to see, wants to understand what is as it is, bracketing for the sake of such objectivity himself and his place in the world. This desire to just see and understand caused already Thales to tumble into his well. Absent-mindedness characterizes the very origin of philosophy and science. It is but the other side of that disinterested objectivity that we demand of all who lay claim to truth.

Human beings who understand themselves first of all as such thinking subjects, who just happen to find themselves in some particular body, in a particular place and time, will not allow such particularities to circumscribe their freedom, but will consider all of this, including their own bodies, as material to be manipulated and fashioned into a successful life. Such persons will of course still require physical shelter and buildings that meet that need, but will hardly expect art, and that includes architecture, to meet their spiritual needs. As with Hegel, the progress of spirit here has left art in its highest sense behind. Purely thinking subjects have no need for art.

2

But let me return to the term “picture.” We tend to think of pictures as representations. Alberti certainly thought of them in this way. Representations refer to what they represent. Buildings, by contrast, may, but usually do not represent anything. We live and work in them. They offer us both physical and spiritual shelter. Consider in this connection how Heidegger’s essay would lead to very different expectations had he called it instead “The Age of the World Building.” To understand the world in the image of a building, perhaps a house, invites thoughts of God as an architect, who created his work for us to enjoy and dwell in. Think of the cosmos of the *Timaeus*. Or of the cosmos of the Middle Ages, a divine architecture that placed human beings near the center. The world is understood here as a well ordered whole in which we all have our proper places. The task of the architect might then be to imitate, to the best of his ability, this divine model. He would thus help us find our place in the world. His work, however, would not be a picture.

Not every representation is a picture. A stage set may represent some architecture or square without therefore becoming a picture. Could Heidegger have called his essay equally well “The Age of the World Theater”? That title would have led me to expect an essay on the world of the Baroque. The Baroque did find in the theater a key metaphor to describe the world into which individuals were born, in which they struggled and eventually died, where we should keep in mind that “theater” is a contrast term. In this respect it is like the word “dream,” which demands the contrast with the way those, who are awake, experience reality. The word “dream” loses its meaning when so totalized that everything is said to be a dream. That is why we cannot carry out the Cartesian thought experiment that would make all that we experience but a dream. The same goes for the word “theater.” We cannot say that all reality is but theater. Once the theater becomes all embracing it ceases to be theater. The Baroque “world-theater” presupposes thus the conviction that there is another world that we shall enter and witness when we step off that stage on which we are now actors. That beyond our everyday reality there lies true reality, that reality that we would enter only after our death. To the extent that we today experience the world we live in as a theatre, we inevitably are thinking of a more genuine way of existing.

The Baroque theater sought to represent this world-theater in which we play our parts. Such representation had a double function: 1) By transforming the world-theater into spectacle, it established a distance between the individual and that theater, a distance that allowed him to enjoy this spectacle as a spectator, allowed him to forget, at least for a time, that he was also an actor in this play; 2) by representing the theater of the world as theater, it invited thoughts of that true reality, which lay beyond death. The Baroque theater is thus ruled by the uneasy conjunction of an at bottom still medieval conviction that art should open us to the reality that transcends and illuminates our life-world and an already modern understanding of art as an aesthetic object that in time lifts the burden of time, at least for a time. In that sense the Baroque world theater can be said to stand in between the medieval world building and the modern world picture.

I suggested that the Baroque especially invites characterization as the age of the world-theater. I do not have time here to show how the metaphor of the theater then affected all aspects of life: we still speak of theaters of war, of anatomical theaters. And

if the theater affected all of life, it also affected all the arts, especially architecture, and here again especially religious architecture. Countless churches were then built in the image of a theater, where “theater” here refers first of all to a building in which actors perform for an audience; “theater” may of course also refer to the performance.

When we speak of the theater of the Baroque, we should keep in mind that the Baroque theater is the product of a profound transformation of the theater. To put it simply: in the Baroque the theater, and not just the theater, but also architecture, and also science, come increasingly under the hegemony of the picture. Understood as the age of the world-theater the Baroque period may indeed be understood as transitional, having its place between the medieval age of the world-building and the modern age of the world-picture.

But we should be more precise. The Baroque theater and also its architecture come not just under the hegemony of the picture, but of the picture ruled by what came to be called *perspectiva artificialis*. Alberti’s *On Painting*, as we have seen, helped inaugurate the rule of the picture so understood by teaching how to use a mathematical form of representation to create convincing representations of what appears as it appears, given a particular point of view. Such painting represents not the objects themselves, but inevitably perspective-bound appearances. These appearances have their measure in the perceiving eye. Here it is important to keep in mind the artificiality of such representation, the violence it does to the way we actually experience things. To put geometry in the service of his construction, Alberti has to assume, as we saw, monocular vision and a flat earth. Given these assumptions, it is easy to come up with a proof of the correctness of Alberti’s construction. Important here is this: for the sake of achieving a certain mastery of appearances, the perspectival art of Alberti subjects what it presents to a human measure that has itself been subjected to the demand for ease of representation. Artful pictorial illusion invites us to mistake it for reality and to forget its merely artificial being. Artifice substitutes simulacra for reality, as the artist usurps the place of God, substituting for God’s creation his own. It is thus easy to understand Jacques Maritain when he understands the single step that carries us in some museum from the rooms that hold the primitives to those where we admire the masters of the Renaissance as a step that

places us “on the floor of a theater.”⁶¹ We have crossed the threshold that separates anthropocentric modernity from the theocentric Middle Ages. And like Heidegger, Maritain, too, links modernity to the hegemony of the picture, for his “theater” is a theater ruled by Albertian perspective, that is to say by the picture so understood. It is a theater where the picture is allowed to triumph over what the theater once was. Lost is the spiritual perspective of medieval art, which sought to open windows in the theater of the world to what was then believed to be true reality. Alberti's art is incompatible with this spiritual perspective. The turn to perspective here means a loss of transcendence, an embrace of illusion.

3

I have suggested that Alberti's *On Painting* helped to inaugurate what Heidegger calls the “Age of the World Picture.” In his essay, to be sure, Heidegger is not thinking of Alberti. The person who is there said to have inaugurated the “Age of the World Picture” is Descartes. But Cartesian method, I already suggested, is anticipated by Albertian perspective and involves an analogous loss of transcendence. Recall the way that for the sake of achieving a certain mastery of appearances, the perspectival art of Alberti subjects what it presents to a human measure that has itself been subjected to the demand for ease of representation. That latter demand is a presupposition of Alberti's embrace of mathematics. Similarly Cartesian method, for the sake of rendering us the masters and possessors of nature, subjects nature to a human measure that has itself been subjected to the demand for ease of comprehension. As the Albertian picture assumes an eye placed before and thus outside it, the Cartesian world-picture assumes an I placed before and thus outside it. The Cartesian *res cogitans* has thus no place in the world whose essence Descartes determines as *res extensa*. The subject has fallen, had to fall out of the world so understood. Science knows nothing of such a thinking substance. All it can do is study brain processes and the like. That is to say, science as such knows nothing of persons deserving respect.

⁶¹ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism, and the Frontiers of Poetry*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Scribner, 1962), p. 52.

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What matters to me here is a picture of the world that has to deny the subject a place in that world. And that world-picture is a presupposition of our science, of its demand for objectivity. It is of course easy to insist that this world-picture should not be confused with our life-world. But the correctness of this observation should not lead us to forget the extent to which our life-world is ever more decisively being transformed by technology. And precisely to this extent, we ourselves are being transformed in the image of the Cartesian subject, becoming ever more free, less bound to particular places, but that means also ever more mobile, rootless, and ghostly. Consider in this respect how the computer is affecting our lives and here I am especially interested in how it has affects our sense of space. With this in mind we might take a look at the role of the computer in architectural design.

Key in this consideration is insight into the relativity of appearance, which has its center in and receives its measure from the perceiving and thinking subject. Such insight is as characteristic of Cusanus as it is of Alberti. Let me return here to the passage from *On Painting* that, I said, reads as if it could have been written by the cardinal:

It would be well to add to the above statements the opinions of philosophers who affirm that if the sky, the stars, the sea, mountains and bodies should become — should God so will, reduced by half, nothing would be diminished in any part to us. All knowledge of large, small; long, short; high, low; broad, narrow; clear, dark; light and shadow and every similar attribute is obtained by comparison.⁶²

Magnitude provides Alberti with his paradigm: we cannot know the absolute size of things; indeed, we do not even know what such absolute size might mean. Our understanding of the size of some object is relative through and through.

In *On Learned Ignorance* Cusanus was to observe seven years later in quite similar words that our understanding relies on comparison:

⁶² Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. and intro. John R. Spencer (New Haven and London: Yale, 1956), p. 55. See Mark Jarzombek, *On Leon Battista Alberti* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

However all those who make an investigation judge the uncertain proportionally, by means of a comparison with what is taken to be certain. Therefore, every inquiry is comparative and uses the means of comparative relation. (50)⁶³

All inquiry presupposes a great deal that is taken to be certain and allowed to go unchallenged. It presupposes something that may seem like a stable ground, the ground e.g. furnished by our language and the associated concepts. But this ground, if Cusanus is right, is ultimately no more stable than the earth on which we stand, which provides Cusanus with a paradigm: it is in fact a shifting ground. To recognize this is to become learned about one's ignorance. The ancients are said to have lacked such 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? (116-117)

Cusanus here invites the reader to engage in a simple thought experiment that must have held for him also a very personal significance. As he tells the reader in the letter to Cardinal Cesarini that he appended to *On Learned Ignorance* as a kind of epilogue, the fundamental thought of that book came to Cusanus in the winter 1437/38, "at sea en route back from Greece,"⁶⁴ where he had worked towards a reconciliation of the different perspectives that divided the Eastern and the Western Church. Recent memories of the haggling at the Council of Basel, of the way the different parties there focused on what divided them, rather than on their common goal, the unity of the Church, must also have colored what he then experienced.

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 the 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. (116-117)

⁶³ Page references in text to Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, trans. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: Banning, 1981)

⁶⁴ *On Learned Ignorance*, p. 158.

Like the painter's perspective, the poles by which we orient ourselves are fictions, created by us. As such, they reflect what happens to be our particular point of view.

In the beginning of the cited passage Cusanus appeals to the principle of learned ignorance. The ancients are said to have lacked "learned ignorance." What they failed to understand was the full extent of the power of perspective. Such ignorance let them mistake perspectival appearance for reality. Their geocentric cosmology was born of this mistake. The earth, to be sure, appears to be the stable center of our life-world. This appearance makes it natural to believe that it must therefore also be at the cosmic center. But it would be equally natural for someone on the moon or on Mars or on any other star to proclaim whatever heavenly body they happened to be on the center of the cosmos. Rest and motion are relative concepts. What we take to be fixed depends on our point of view. Every attempt to seize an absolute center has to suffer shipwreck on the reef of infinity. Our life-world to be sure has its center, a center established by the accident of our body's location. In this sense the earth provides us humans with a natural center. But that center does not bind reflection. And the same can be said of the body that places us on this earth, assigns us terrestrials our point of view and provides us with a natural measuring rod. That provides Alberti with his measure and the nature of the human understanding explains the choice of a mathematical mode of representation. For Descartes the human ability to comprehend things becomes the measure of what deserves to be called real. A theocentric understanding of truth gives way to an anthropocentric understanding of truth. Just as Alberti stands on the threshold that separates the theocentric perspective of medieval art from the anthropocentric art of the Renaissance and the art that followed, so Cusanus stands on the threshold that separates the anthropocentric understanding of truth that presides over modernity from the theocentric conception of truth that presided over the Middle Ages.

5. On Learned Ignorance

1

I suggested that more than any other major thinker Nicholas of Cusa helps mark the threshold separating the Middle Ages 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*. In 1465 he founded the first Italian printing shop in the Benedictine monastery of Subiaco, encouraged by Cusanus. 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)

Johannes Wenck von Herrenberg, who had studied at Paris and became a professor 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)⁶⁵

This state of being at sea brings to mind that of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, when he first speaks of the doctrine of the eternal recurrence. I will indeed suggest 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. I already pointed out that he presided over the Council of Basel where their paths crossed once again.

2

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

Metaphysics 1. 2. 982b11-17: 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

⁶⁵ Page refernces in text to Jasper Hopkins, Nicholas of Cusa’s Debate with John Wenck. A Translation and an Appraisal of *De Ignota Litteratura* [IL] and *Apologia Docta Ignorantiae* [AP] (Mineapolis: Arhtur J. Banning Press, 1981).

phenomena of the moon and those of the sun and the stars, and about the genesis of the universe.⁶⁶

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 the human being 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 21-22)

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.

⁶⁶ Translation C. D., Ross.

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 title of the first chapter suggests that *gelehrte* might be a better translation than *belehrte*. So understood the title gestures towards the doctrine of the coincidence of opposites, which could be said to offer the controversial key to this book

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)

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)

I would underscore the words sound or healthy (*sanus*) and free (*liber*).

The mark of truth is the inability to withhold our assent. Truth and necessity 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, (49, Cf. 52/53)

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: *Mens - mensura - mensurare*.⁶⁷

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)

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

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 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)

As measuring, and that is to say all knowing, is essentially finite, 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 know the unknowable unknowingly, so that our ignorance becomes learned.

Number is understood by Cusanus as the presupposition of comparative relation.

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

⁶⁷ Cf. *Idiota de mente*.

or accidentally. Perhaps for this reason Pythagoras deemed all things to be constituted and understood through the power of numbers. (50)

Cusanus here would appear here to have Aristotle in mind:

Metaphysics 1, 5 985b 23-986a1 2: 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:

Metaphysics II, 1 993a29-993b: 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.

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 chapter concludes with an assertion that learned ignorance is the goal of our knowledge.

3

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. the boundless universe; the third book the most perfect of things, i.e. Jesus.

The transition to this second chapter seems rather 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. (5)

The following 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)

In what sense is the Absolute Maximum the Absolute One that is all things?

How are we to understand this “is”? Do things participate in the One as in some superentity? And why does fullness 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. (IL 26, [430-431])

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.

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]. (W57; 475)

Cusanus's reply is interesting also for what it has to say about his 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.” (AP58-59)

I have already suggested that the general difficulty is tied to the way Wenck reads Cusanus. To make sense of what Cusanus has to say he has to misunderstand him, committed as he is to a broadly Aristotelian position. 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; 7)

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 Jesus, blessed forever. [I shall add these points] according as Jesus Himself will provide inspiration. (51)

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; 7)
With finite things you can always imagine something greater or less. The maximum is by its very nature infinite.

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)

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)

Cusanus thus insists on the difference between the divine and the human intellect:

The truth could not possibly be other than it is. An understanding of the truth is thus necessary. 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.*)

6. The Infinity of the Cosmos

1

Let me begin with 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)

Let me say just a bit more about the word *proportio*, which plays 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 is urine, which is said to be “healthy” by an **analogy of proportion**: i.e. urine is not literally healthy, but is called healthy when 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. 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,

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)

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)

The truth could not possibly be other than it is. An understanding of the truth would thus be 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)

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 its possibility and actuality coincide?

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)

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)

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)

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. 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)

At this point all conceptions of God seem 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. (53-54)

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. For our intellect cannot, by means of reasoning, 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 incomprehensibly, beyond all rational inference, 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 contraction to quantity of mass or quantity of power—all things. (54)

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.

3

If whatever is not the Absolute Maximum is finite, if the Absolute Maximum alone deserves to be called infinite, how can Cusanus now apply the term to the universe, as the title of the first chapter of Book Two, **Corollaries Preliminary to Inferring one Infinite universe does**. In what sense can it be said to be infinite?

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)

From this Cusanus infers that there is 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)

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)

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.

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. (88)

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)

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, to the infinite number. In that sense the universe is in its essence finite: but counting I never come to an end. 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.

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.

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)

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. (90)

There is then a sense in which the universe, 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, makes it 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.

4

Chapter Eleven: Corollaries regarding motion 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 unqualifiedly 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 [unqualifiedly] 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)

This leads to a denial of **the central position of the earth**. That central position is claimed to be **no more than a perspectival illusion**. At this point of the discussion it is not altogether clear what Cusanus is asserting: does it 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. (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 precision. But 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:

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. For 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. (114-115)

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)

Still, a defender of the view that Cusanus does not really leave geocentrism behind can point out that while Cusanus 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. (159)

But this modified geocentrism seems finally incompatible with his understanding of the universe as having its center and circumference in God. It would appear to be no more than a natural illusion. The real 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)

5

Chapter Twelve: The conditions of the earth 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 Copernicus will invoke once more to prepare for the reception of his revolution, where Copernicus supports it with a reference to the Aeneid. But Cusanus puts it to a somewhat different use.

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)

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**. The old Platonic axiom privileging the circle remains as a regulative ideal. And even for Copernicus the circularity of the orbits of the planets remains an axiom of nature.

But we should note 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**, which can be understood as a corollary of the conception of God developed in Book One. 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. 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. 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 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)

Cusanus's 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. (118) 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. (167)

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

Nor [can we know this] with respect to space, either. 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)

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 disproportionately 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)

The opposition of an incorruptible celestial and a corruptible sublunar sphere is rejected, this rejection 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)

Much of **Chapter Thirteen: The admirable divine art n the creation of the world and of the elements** is taken up by quite traditional praise of the wisdom of God's creation. God is said to have used arithmetic, geometry, music, and likewise geometry, the same arts that we use when we investigate things (122). But 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)

We cannot understand the ways of the creator. Important is the insistence on the **muteness of things**, as far as human reason is concerned.

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)

No longer does nature offer itself to us as a book in which we can read.

Having become learned about our ignorance, we should not search out the final cause of things. **We understand things only to the extent that we ourselves can make them. A new reality principle announces itself.** But so understood the world is mute.

7. The Rehabilitation of Protagoras

1

Let me begin by returning to Chapter One of the First Book of *On Learned Ignorance*. The following sentence provides a key to the entire work:

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

But **what is taken to be certain** is never a firm foundation. We remain caught up in our human point of view. Thus we cannot but help to compare things with the measure provided by the make-up of our own body. This measure does allow us to call things large or small. The body provides us with a natural measure: the finger, the hand, the arm, the foot, the leg. But we should think also of the moving body.

The body also provides us with something like a natural center. In this sense geocentrism can be called a natural illusion.

I suggested already that Cusanus here is close to what Alberti has to say in *On Painting*:

Thus all things are known by comparison, for comparison contains within itself a power which immediately demonstrates in objects, which is more, less, or equal. From which it is said that a thing is large when it is greater than something small and largest when it is greater than something large.

Like Cusanus, Alberti calls attention to the fact that our **human being** provides us with a natural measure. This leads him to defend the sophist Protagoras,

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.

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, a humanistic self-assertion finds striking expression.

As I said earlier, I find Alberti's rehabilitation of the sophist Protagoras, sharply criticized by both Plato and Aristotle, remarkable. And I find it significant that we find the same rehabilitation of Protagoras in Cusanus, not in *On Learned Ignorance*, but in a later Dialogue, *De Beryllo*, which appeared in 1458. Here he explicitly defends the sophist against the critique of Aristotle. As I pointed out earlier, I think it likely that

Cusanus had read *On Painting* when he began work on *On Learned Ignorance* and that he encountered there the references to Protagoras.

Be this as it may, Cusanus' meditations on infinity have to lead 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 thus 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.

2

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

Thirdly, note the saying of Protagoras that man is the measure of things. [Cusanus had written "Pytagorae." This was corrected in the critical edition by Ludwig Baur with the interesting comment: "Nicolaus scripsit Pytagorae. Hunc erroremnde 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.""] [I find that confusion to be more than just a simple mistake. I find it revealing.]⁶⁸ 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

⁶⁸ Quoted in Santinello, *Alberti*, p. 287, n. 44.

transcendent things [are to be such] as can transcend. Hence, man finds in himself, as in a measuring scale, all created things.⁶⁹

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.

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 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;

⁶⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Beryllo, Opera Omnia*, vol. XI, ed. Hans G. Sängner and Karl Bormann (Hamburg: Meiner, 1988), p. 6; trans. Jasper Hopkins, *On [Intellectual] Eyeglasses, Nicholas of Cusa: Metaphysical Speculations* (Minneapolis: Banning, 1997), p. 37.

likewise the Apostle Paul, writing to the Romans, says that the invisible God is known in and through the visible things of the world.⁷⁰

This, to be sure, hardly sounds like a critique of Aristotle. Quite the opposite: Cusanus sounds rather 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.⁷¹ As befits a humanist Alberti here is making a reference to Cicero (*De amicitia*). He would seem to be referring both to the fact that he is not interested just in the geometry of correct perspectival representation, but in its incarnation in paint, and that he is addressing not just learned humanists who know their Latin, but artists, who need the Italian. Again we have the descent of abstract learning into the sphere of the craftsman, of production.⁷²

What impresses Cusanus is not just the beauty and wealth of the visible, but the way all we see is dependent on the fact that we possess eyes: 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.'⁷³

The reference is to *Metaphysics* IV, 5 (1010b30-1011a2). Which Ross translates as follows:

And, in general, if only the sensible exists, there would be nothing if animate things were not; for there would be no faculty of sense. The view that neither the objects of the sensations nor the sensations would exist is doubtless true (for they are affections of the perceiver), but that the substrata which cause the sensation should not exist even apart from sensation is impossible.

⁷⁰ *De Beryllo*, p. 65; trans. p. 68

⁷¹ 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.

⁷² Cf. Frank Zöllner, "Die kunsttheoretische und literarische Legitimierung von Affektübertragung und Kunstgenuss in Battista Albertis *De pictura* "
archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/.../Zoellne

⁷³ *De Beryllo*, p. 69; trans. p. 70.

And does the same not hold 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.⁷⁴

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.

But first this question: did Cusanus here borrow from the younger Alberti? 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, as I pointed out above, in a marginal note he himself points out the confusion. But should we consider this a mere confusion? As we shall see, Cusanus's understanding of mathematics invites a blurring of the distinction between Pythagoras and Protagoras.⁷⁵

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.⁷⁶

Metaphysics, X, 1, 1053a31-1053b4. 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.

⁷⁴ *De Beryllo*, p. 69; trans. p. 70.

⁷⁵ See the following note.

⁷⁶ Cf. Trinkaus, p. 193.

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.

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?⁷⁷

Plato already accuses Protagoras of confusing appearance and reality; or, of confusing perceiving and knowing.

⁷⁷ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 152a. Trans. F. M. Cornford.

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.

4

In his *Idiota de Mente* Cusanus thus has his layman conjecture "that mind [*mens*] takes its name from measuring [*mensurare*]." ⁷⁸ Elsewhere Cusanus appeals to Albertus Magnus who, relying on a false etymology, had tied the word *mens* (mind) to *metior* (to measure). ⁷⁹ He could also have appealed to Thomas Aquinas. ⁸⁰ 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 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. ⁸¹ 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

⁷⁸ 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.

⁷⁹ See Maurice de Gandillac, *Nikolaus von Kues, Studien zu seiner Philosophie und philosophischen Weltanschauung*, trans. Karl Fleischmann, *vom Verfasser grundlegend überarbeitet Ausgabe* (Düsseldorf: Schwan, 1953), p. 152. Gandillac refers to a sermon from 1455 (CLXVII, 509) where Cusanus appeals to Albertus Magnus, *De Anima*.

⁸⁰ See Gandillac, p. 152, who refers us to *De Veritate*, X, art. 1, In sent. I, 35, 1: "*Mens dicitur a metior, metiris.*"

⁸¹ Plato, *Republic VII*, 524E-525A

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.⁸² It is this aspect of Cusanus' thinking that invites comparison with Kant.

5

The nature of this process is made more explicit in the very beginning of the first of the *Idiota* dialogues, *Idiota de Sapientia*⁸³ 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.⁸⁴ But both, as we have 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 re-creative knowledge. The human knower may indeed be likened to Alberti's painter, but

⁸² Cf. Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1923), I, p. 9.

⁸³ Nicholas of Cusa, *Idiota de Sapientia*; trans. *The Layman on Wisdom* in Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge* (Minneapolis: Banning, 1996).

⁸⁴ 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: Random House, 1945): "One implies the idea of a primary measure; and number is multitude measured by one."

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's favorite terms, conjectures, where Gandillac suggests that in the Latin Cusanus hears in the Latin *coniectura* 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.

6

Cusanus extends the thought and claims that 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."⁸⁵ The being of whatever presents itself is a being relative to the human perceiver and knower. This invites comparison with Heidegger's understanding of Being in *Being and Time*. 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.

Consider once more Aristotle's critique of Protagoras.

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.

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⁸⁵ De Beryllo, p. 69; trans. p. 70.

⁸⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, X, 1, 1053a31-1053b4. Trans. W. D. Ross.

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⁸⁸ 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.

⁸⁹ 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*.

this when we turn to the *Idiota* dialogues. 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 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.⁹¹ 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, seeks to discover unity in the manifold. The manifold must therefore be brought under a unity. But unity cannot simply be imposed, just as the measures we use must be created to us in response to what we experience. In its attempt to seize the unity it seeks, the intellect cannot simply impose its measures on the manifold but must in some sense draw them from the world. But how is this to be thought?⁹²

⁹⁰ See Gandillac, p. 152, who refers us to *De Veritate*, X, art. 1, In sent. I, 35, 1: “Mens dicitur a metior, metiris.”

⁹¹ Plato, *Republic* VII, 524E-525A

⁹² Cf. Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1923), I, p. 9.

8. The Power of the Measure

1

According to Cusanus 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, is supposed to measure our human truth. But for that to be possible, the truth of things must somehow present itself. How is such presentation to be thought? Can we make sense of such a comprehension? As soon as there is experience there is also the interpreting activity of the human mind, which subjects whatever it understands to its measures. 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 that 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 return to the unity that illuminates the countless particulars that make up our world.

2

I already pointed out that Cusanus blurs Protagoras and Pythagoras. Such blurring represents not just a momentary confusion, occasioned perhaps by Bessarion's translation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which has Pythagoras where it should have said Protagoras — a confusion Cusanus himself noted. But he also must have found that confusion significant, otherwise it is hard to understand why he should have made the same mistake in *De Beryllo*.⁹³ Cusanus understands the human mind as an unfolding unity. That unfolding finds its most immediate expression in mathematics. Mathematics thus provides us with a particularly perspicuous language. Chapter Eleven of *On Leaned Ignorance* speaks to this. It bears the significant title: *Mathematics Assists Us Very Greatly in Apprehending Various Divine Truths*

Consider its beginning:

⁹³ See OWP 07.

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 seen as in a mirror and a symbolism. 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. (DI 61)

“In a mirror and a symbolism,” *in speculo et in aenigmate*, refers to I Corinthians, 13, 12:

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.

What sense are we make of this? Where do we find an appropriate mirror? And where the appropriate enigma or symbol of God?

All finite things are said to stand in a comparative relationship, that is to say, are gathered together to form a universe. The bond that ties them together is the maximum in which they are all 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]) (DI 61)

We can understand reality, be it God or nature, only by relying on symbols. What kind of symbolism should then be chosen?

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. (DI 61)

Before we can ask whether an image, or a symbol, or 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 when we attempt to represent something.

This explains the superiority of mathematical symbols.

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., mathematical (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 very certain to us.

Therefore, in mathematics the wise wisely sought illustrations of things that were to be searched out by the intellect. (DI 61)

By their relative freedom from material associations and their fixed character mathematics are to be preferred. As already noted, every real circle, i.e. every circular thing, can never be more than an approximation to the thought circle. And yet there are better and worse approximations. Cusanus keeps insisting on the final incommensurability of measure and measured, but also insist on a certain commensurability, such as exists between geometrical figures such as circle and polygon. Once again, our attempt to express the circumference in terms of the radius, to square the circle, allows for better and worse approximations and in his mathematical writings Cusanus attempts to compete with those of his predecessors, such as Archimedes, to arrive, we would say, at a superior approximation to the value of π . Once again, the comparative is what we ought to strive for, not the superlative. Our inability to lay claim to the superlative thus in no way leads Cusanus to a scepticism.

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. (DI 62)

The superiority of the mathematical symbol is due to the fact that here the mind is concerned with its own creation. The doctrine is not really developed in DI, although hinted at in DI 54

For by the movement of our reason names are assigned to things which, in terms of comparative relation, can be comparatively greater or lesser.

What is hinted at here becomes explicit in later writings: (*Complementum Theologicum*: cf. Gandillac 148, p. 9). The mind is understood by Cusanus as unfolding unity. As such it creates the measures it brings to things. Numbers provide the form of these measures. Number can be considered the principle of reason, *the principium rationis*.⁹⁴ The

⁹⁴ Maurice de Gandillac, *La philosophie de Nicolas de Cues* (Paris: Aubier, 1942). Thoroughly revised German edition: Nikolaus von Cues. *Studien zu seiner Philosophie*

creation of number takes place within the mind. That is why number symbolism is a particularly fruitful way of investigating the mysteries of the divine.

3

Cusanus is not only interested in theological matters. The superiority of mathematical symbols also applies to the study of nature. Cusanus attempted to develop some of the implications of this in the fourth and last of his *Idiota* dialogues *Idiota de staticis experimentis*.

But of what significance is Cusanus' rather amateurish little dialogue. Does it earn Cusanus a place in the history of science? What does it still have to teach us?

That Cusanus deserves some sort of place in the history of science, at least in the pre-history of modern science, seems undeniable. Alexandre Koyré thus calls him the thinker who is most often credited or blamed for the destruction of the medieval cosmos, which entails a destruction of Aristotelian physics and that destruction would indeed seem to be a presupposition of post-Copernican, post-Galilean science. Koyré also suggests that one key to that destruction is provided by Cusanus' bold transference of the hermetic metaphor of the infinite sphere, the sphere that has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere, from God to the cosmos. But what does such transference of a metaphor have to do with science as we have come to understand it? To be sure Kepler, Bruno, and even Descartes, they all cite Cusanus as a precursor, but, as Koyré points out, there is good reason not to construe Cusanus' infinitization of the cosmos as an anticipation of Copernicus. Cusanus does not claim to give us the true account of the cosmos. Instead he forces the reader to put into question the very idea of such a true account — human understanding does not seem capable of giving such an account: it inevitably suffers shipwreck on the infinity of space. Cusanus thus does not ask us to exchange a geocentric for a heliocentric cosmos, as did Copernicus. Rather it is the very idea of a cosmic center that is undermined by his speculations and thought experiments. A cosmic center is unintelligible. And must this not also deny us an understanding of absolute motion? And with this, have we not also undermined the claim of astronomy to

und philosophischen Weltanschauung, trans. Karl Fleischmann (Düsseldorf: Schwann, 1953), p. 164).

truth? Must we not demand of the astronomer a certain cognitive resignation? On this Cusanus would seem to have agreed with Thomas Aquinas, even if he was to give such resignation a rather different and much more radical turn.

This suggests what both links and separates Cusanus from the new science, or, to be more specific, from a thinker like Copernicus: what links them is their reflection on the perspectival character of all we experience, a reflection that is the central theme of the cardinal's main work, *On Learned Ignorance*, a thought familiar already to Plato; all we experience is never more than appearance. Reality will reveal its secrets only to thought. Reality as it is in itself is invisible. The last Cusanus would grant, but what would seem to separate him from the new science is the latter's confidence to have found in mathematics the Ariadne's thread that leads us out of the labyrinth of appearances to reality. The astronomical resignation of the Middle Ages is now rejected. But is such confidence justified? Is it demanded by science?

Koyré himself, as I pointed out, was reluctant to understand Cusanus as one, let alone as the author of the scientific revolution that issued in our modern world: he wanted that revolution to begin with Copernicus, that is in the sixteenth century, and not a hundred years earlier. And if Koyré is right, there are features to the cardinal's thought that separate him decisively from the originators of the new science, even if they may have invoked him as a precursor. "The world-conception of Nicholas of Cusa is not based upon a criticism of contemporary astronomical or cosmological theories, and does not lead, at least in his own thinking, to a revolution in science. Nicholas of Cusa, though it has often been claimed, is not a forerunner of Nicholas Copernicus. And yet his conception is extremely interesting and, in some of its bold assertions — or negations — it goes far beyond anything Copernicus ever dared to think of."⁹⁵ But in spite of such daring, what on Koyré's view prevents us from interpreting speculations by Nicholas of Cusa as anticipating those of Copernicus is first of all the fact that they were not meant as contributions to science. And indeed, as Thomas McTighe points out, Cusanus "did not make any truly substantive contributions to physics or astronomy."⁹⁶ But while this can

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

⁹⁶ Thomas P. McTighe, "Nicholas of Cusa's Theory of Science and its Metaphysical Background," in *Niccolo' Cusano. Agli Inizi del Mondo Moderno. Atti del Congresso*

be granted, this is not to say that Koyré is right when he claims that, "in deep opposition to the fundamental inspiration of the founders of modern science and the modern world-view, who, rightly or wrongly, tried to assert the panarchy of mathematics, [Cusanus] denies the very possibility of the mathematical treatment of nature."⁹⁷ As we shall see, there is a sense in which Cusanus, while he did indeed call into question "the panarchy of mathematics, did not at all deny "the possibility of the mathematical treatment of nature." Quite the opposite. As his little dialogue *Idiota de Staticis Experimentis* shows, he called for it.⁹⁸ So if this is what is taken to matter, it would seem that a case can be made for including Cusanus in this history precisely because, long before Galileo and Kepler, he calls just for such a mathematical treatment of nature. Whatever separates Cusanus from the new science is thus not, as Koyré claims, that he denies the possibility of the mathematical treatment of nature. And yet there does indeed seem to be a profound incompatibility between the approach to nature advocated by Cusanus and the thinking of a Galileo or a Kepler; and Koyré is right to point to the way the "founders of modern science and the modern world-view ... tried to assert the panarchy of mathematics." Cusanus challenged such an assertion and this challenge, I would like to argue, remains important because the question of the legitimacy and limits of such a mathematical approach remains with us. I shall return to this argument, but I would like to begin by turning to our dialogue to support the claim that Cusanus not only does not deny the possibility of a mathematical treatment of nature but calls for just such a treatment.

2

Idiota de staticis experimentis is the fourth and last of the *Idiota* dialogues. The first two bear the title *The Layman on Wisdom*, the third the title, *The Layman on Mind*. It

internazionale in occasione del V centenario della morte di Nicolò Cusano, Bressanone, 6-10 settembre 1964 (Florence: Sansoni, 1970), p. 317. See also A. Richard Hunter, "What Did Nicholas of Cusa Contribute to Science?" *Nicholas of Cusa. In Search of God and Wisdom*, ed. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbecki (Leiden: Brill, 1991), pp. 101-115.

⁹⁷ Alexander Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1958), p. 19.

⁹⁸ Nicolaus Cusanus, English translation, "On Experiments Done with Weight-Scales," in Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge* (Minneapolis: Banning, 1996), pp. 319-371.

is especially in this concluding dialogue that Cusanus calls for a mathematical treatment of nature,⁹⁹ where his interest in mathematics takes a decidedly worldly, perhaps we can even say pragmatic turn that leaves the theological neo-Platonic concerns that usually occupy him in his writings, especially when they turn to mathematics, pretty much behind. Of greater concern here are such matters as medicine, weather forecasting, alchemy, and astrology. In this little dialogue he throws out numerous suggestions as to how such insight into the power of mathematical measures, where he is focusing on weight-scales, might be put to use: consider the very beginning of this dialogue:

Layman: Although in this world nothing can attain unto preciseness, nevertheless we know from experience that the verdict of weight-scales are quite accurate and that therefore, they are generally accepted. But since with regard to objects that have different origins it is not possible for equal weights to be present in identically sized objects, please tell me whether or not anyone has [ever] written down the different experimental results pertaining to weights.”

And after the Orator replies that he has not heard of any such attempt, the Layman continues:

It seems to me that by reference to differences of weight we can more truly attain unto the hidden aspects of things and can know many things by means of more plausible surmises (*coniectura*) (DSE 321)

The Orator supports the Layman’s intuition that careful weighing of different substances might reveal to us their hidden nature by appealing, not to experience, as the former had done, but to the authority of the Bible.

Your point is well taken. For a certain prophet said that weight and weight-scales are the judgment of the Lord, who created all things in number, weight, and measure and who balanced the fountains of waters and weighed the foundations of the earth, as [Solomon] the wise writes. (*Proverbs* 16:11. *Wisdom* 11:21-23. *Proverbs* 8:28-29)

⁹⁹ Nicolaus Cusanus, English translation, "On Experiments Done with Weight-Scales," in Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge* (Minneapolis: Banning, 1996), pp. 319-371.

The Orator here offers Scriptural support to a thought that would have been familiar to Galileo, Kepler, and Descartes, who all were convinced that God has written the book of nature in the language of mathematics. But Cusanus' Layman refuses to be interrupted by this pious observation, as indeed in this entire dialogue he appears quite uninterested in theological issues. And so he just continues:

So if the amount of water from one source is not of the same weight as is a similar amount [of water] from another source, then a judgment about the difference-of-nature between the one source and the other source is better arrived at by means of a weight-scale than by means of some other instrument. (DSE 347)

The Orator once again finds this intuition supported, this time by the authority of Vitruvius, but once again the Layman refuses to be deflected from his train of thought. Convinced as he is that there is much to be learned from a comparison of the different weights of things, he thus calls for the compiling of tables of the specific gravity of different substances, something he thinks might prove particularly useful in medicine. He thus calls on doctors to rely, not just on secondary qualities, such as the color or the smell of urine, to diagnose a certain illness, but to weigh and record the specific gravity of the urine or blood of sick and healthy individuals.

Orator: Do you think that in all cases the situation is as you indicated it to be in the case of water?

Layman: Yes, I do. For identical sizes, of whatsoever different things, are not at all of the same weight. Accordingly, since the weight of blood or the weight of urine is different for a healthy man and for a sick man, for a youthful man or for an elderly man or for a German and an African, wouldn't it be especially useful to a physician to have all these differences recorded? (DSE 323-325)

It is especially medicine that Cusanus thinks would gain from such a more quantitative approach and so he has his *Idiota* continue:

I think that a physician can make a truer judgment from the weight of the urine together with its color than from just its color, which is misleading.

Turning to a more quantitative approach, he suggests, doctors might gain a clearer understanding of just how much of a certain medicine to prescribe. And he goes on to suggest that the weighing of water might also lead to more accurate time-keeping devices.

What interests me here is this privileging of what can be measured and weighed over what can be seen, of primary over secondary qualities, which looks ahead to Galileo and Descartes. Such a theory strikes at the very heart of Aristotle's science of nature. Recall the way Aristotle constructs his table of elements. Crucial are two pairs of secondary qualities, hot and cold and dry and moist. They yield the fourfold

	dry	moist
hot	fire	air
cold	earth	water

By privileging primary over secondary qualities we rob the Aristotelian understanding of the four sublunar elements of its foundation.

We should note the recurrent suggestion in the dialogue that it would be very helpful to have reliable information on the specific gravity of different substances under different circumstances. As the Orator puts it in concluding the dialogue:

You have now explained sufficiently the reasons why you wish for the weights of things to be measured by means of a weight-scale and to be recorded both serially and multiply. For indeed, we see that that book would be very useful. And we see that the undertaking of it by great men ought to be urged, so that in different provinces [experimental weights] would be registered and would be collected into one [book], so that we would more readily be brought to many things that are [now] hidden from us. And I will not cease everywhere to promote its being done. (DSE 369-370)

It would indeed be useful. Consider the following observation:

Elements are, in part, transformed one into another. For example, in the case of a plate-of-glass placed in the snow, we experience that air on the glass is condensed into water, which we find as a fluid on the glass. Similarly we experience that a certain [kind of] water is turned into stones (just as water is turned into ice) and that a hardening,

petrifying power is present in certain springs [of water] which harden into stone objects placed into them. Likewise there is said to be found a certain kind of water from Hungary that turns iron into copper because of the power-of-glazing that is in that water. From a consideration of such powers it is evident that [the various] waters are not purely elemental things but are things composed of elements. And it would be very delightful to know the weights of the various powers of all such waters, so that from the differences of weight in air and in oil we might make closer surmises about the powers. (DSE 345-347)

Such a careful measuring of the specific gravity of different substances might lead us to a better understanding of the elements of which they are composed. Such an understanding in turn might lead, Cusanus' *Idiota* suggests, to a better understanding of what make one soil fertile, another barren, or whether coins were indeed of pure gold, or whether it was indeed gold that an alchemist had produced.

The technique would also avail very much for knowing how much the adulterated products of alchemy veered from the real thing." (DSE 337)

And just as careful use of the balance scale will show just how much or rather how little the alchemists are able to accomplish, so an insistence on grounding the pronouncements of science in what can be observed and measured lets Cusanus' layman be suspicious of astrology. Not that all its predictions can simply be dismissed. He himself claims to have had some success foretelling the future. But where astrology appears successful, he suggests, such success rests on no science and has probably little to do with the stars.

However, when I have paid attention to [someone's] countenance, his clothes, his eye-movements, to the form of his words and their weightiness, to the state of things I requested him to make known to me, at repeated moments, then I have suspected that surmises can be made by one to whom something quite true comes to mind unreflectingly — someone in whom a certain presaging spirit seems to speak. However, I think that with regard to this [predictive activity] no [structured] art is possible and that one who has [this] sense-of-judgment cannot pass it on and that a wise man ought not to busy himself with these predictive activities. (365)

The supposed science of astrology, Cusanus uses the term *ars*, here masks an intuitive psychological understanding.

The Orator once again readily agrees and cites yet another authority in support, this time St. Augustine, who speaks of a drunkard who could read other people's minds and "exposed thieves and brought to light, in an amazing way, other hidden matters."

(365). The Idiota once again is unimpressed by this appeal to an eminent authority, indeed claims a similar power for himself, only to dismiss it:

I know that I have often foretold many things, according as my spirit brought [them] to mind; and yet, I did not at all know the basis for [my prediction]. In the end it seemed it me not to be permitted to a serious man to speak without a basis, and I thenceforth kept silent. (365)

Cusanus knows: not all our understanding is well grounded. But while he is unwilling to deny the occasional success of such an intuitive understanding and might thus have been willing to grant doctors and astrologers who relied on Renaissance magic a measure of success, he also is profoundly suspicious of it, just because it does not rest on anything that deserves to be called science. It has no method.

Cusanus here presents himself to us as more modern than Ficino, a generation younger, or Pico, or a 150 years later, Bruno, or Campanella, who all remained committed to a pre-modern, magical world view. And yet there would seem to be an abyss that separates the cardinal's amateurish thought experiments from the science inaugurated by Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, and Descartes. And the difference is not explained by pointing out that Cusanus is indeed just an amateur who does not take the time to seriously pursue what he is here calling for, content to throw out a number of conjectures, as he calls them, that he does not bother to test. What matters is his advocacy of a mathematical approach to nature. How are we to understand such advocacy? Cusanus' down-to-earth Idiota appeals to experience to support the approach he advocates, but as the preceding three dialogues, make clear, his advocacy of the weight scale and of a more mathematical approach to nature has also a different and more important foundation.

4

Whatever separates Cusanus from the new science, it is not, as Koyré claims, that he denies the possibility of the mathematical treatment of nature. Quite the opposite, he calls for it. And yet, despite the pious words that Cusanus puts into the mouth of his orator, that God "created all things in number, weight, and measure," there is a sense in which Cusanus refuses to assert what Koyré calls the "panarchy of mathematics." One

way of putting this is to say, Cusanus refused to endorse what Cassirer called the Christian Platonism that is a presupposition of the new science.¹⁰⁰

Aristotle's philosophy of nature had been one of the main obstacles standing in the way of the emerging new science. Plato with his emphasis on mathematics, think of the *Timaeus*, offered a more congenial philosophy. Recall the famous passage from Galileo's Assayer, where he claims that "philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe." To write this book God used the language of mathematics. And this language, Galileo claims, we are able to understand. Plato, to be sure, would have had some difficulty with the claim that God used the language of mathematics to write the book of nature. A Pythagoras might have thought so, but, as Cassirer points out, Plato did not think that philosophy was written in nature. Within itself the mind finds access to the invisible cosmos of the ideas. The material world is of course informed by the forms — as shown by the creation account in the *Timaeus* — but also always offers resistance to such formation. In the material world the forms are never completely victorious. Plato thus thinks in terms of the opposition of matter and form, an opposition that easily leads to a certain demonization of the material and sensuous, which is seen as a force that alienates us from our true spiritual home and drags us and the logos down into time.

Just on this point there is a decisive difference between the Christian and the Platonic understanding of nature. If God is omnipotent, the all-powerful creator of all that is, then there can be nothing outside and resisting his creative power. If then this God, like Plato's demiurge, is a geometer, must not matter too be geometrical in its very

¹⁰⁰ Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in the Renaissance*, trans. and intro. Mario Domandi (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1964). pp. 168-169. See also Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit*, 4 vols. (Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), vol. 1, pp. 389-390. What separates Galileo from Plato is similarly stressed by Husserl: "For Platonism the real had a more or less perfect methexis in the ideal. This afforded ancient geometry possibilities of a primitive application to reality. [But] through Galileo's mathematization of nature, nature is idealized under the guidance of the new mathematics; nature itself becomes— to express it in a modern way— a mathematical manifold." Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology. An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. and intro. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 23.

essence? And so Kepler could insist that "Where there is matter, there is geometry."¹⁰¹ Galileo and Descartes would have agreed.

Cassirer not only speaks of Galileo's Platonism, but he also suggests that Cusanus' call for a mathematical approach to nature may be understood as just another corollary of his Platonism. To be sure, if Galileo's Platonism is a Christian Platonism at odds with what Plato thought, the same can be said of the Platonism of Cusanus. But Cusanus, emphasizing the infinity of God, insists on the unbridgable gap that separates divine from human reason. There are indeed a great many and usually very favorable references to Plato and the Platonic tradition scattered throughout Cusanus' writings. But once this has been said, it is necessary to add that the cardinal does not hesitate to criticize Plato when he thinks it necessary. And this critique brings out the profound distance that separates the two thinkers. It also casts light on what would have made it impossible for Cusanus to endorse the Platonism of a Kepler and a Galileo.

That Cusanus is very much aware of what separates him from Plato is shown by this quotation from his dialogue *De Beryllo*:

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] 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]. 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."¹⁰²

Cusanus here is challenging the Platonic claim that we have an intellectual vision of mathematical as independent realities existing outside the mind. They are said to be constructions of the human mind. And the same, he holds, goes for Plato's forms.

Cusanus proceeds to explain what he has in mind:

¹⁰¹ "Where there is matter, there is geometry."

— Kepler, Johannes (1571-1630), (*Ubi materia, ibi geometria.*) J. Koenderink *Solid Shape*, Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1990

¹⁰² *De Beryllo*, p. 55; trans. p. 62.

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.¹⁰³

Of interest is the way Cusanus invites us to understand what it is to understand in the image of a craftsman's know-how, a simile Descartes will rely on in the *Discourse on Method*. Unlike Plato, Cusanus sees no reason to reify the idea of the house and to give it an independent reality. All such things, he insists, have their origin not in nature, but in the creative human spirit responding to the world in which we find ourselves.¹⁰⁴ Plato's forms, just like his mathematical, are understood by Cusanus as products of the unfolding of the human mind. For him already, as later for Descartes, there is a sense in which we fully comprehend things only to the extent that we can make them. And this explains why mathematical representations of nature deserve to be ranked above others. When dealing with mathematical the mind is dealing with its own creations. When I have understood the definition of a circle I possess what Descartes would have called a clear and distinct understanding of it, because the definition gives the rule for its construction. Here the mind is concerned with what it has created. It is this greater adequacy of mathematical descriptions to our mind's mode of operation that lets Cusanus call for the mathematization of the science of nature. To the extent that I can represent nature mathematically I can recreate it.

What matters here are not the details, but the general direction in which Cusanus would have us proceed: number gives us the key to how to represent and to learn more about the workings of nature. Like ruler and clock, the weight-scale helps us to re-describe nature in a way that makes it more commensurable with our mind's mode of operation. Implicit in this mathematization of the science of nature is a shift from the heterogeneity of the immediately experienced world to the homogeneity of a world subjected to the measure of number. But to repeat, with Cusanus this privileging of mathematics has its foundation first of all not in the nature of things, but is relative to the nature of human understanding. We can imagine a being who knows what is by means of

¹⁰³ *De Beryllo*, p. 55; trans. p. 62.

¹⁰⁴ *De Beryllo*, p. 55; trans. p. 62.

genetic definitions, somewhat in the way that the definition of a circle gives us a rule for its construction. God may know things in some such way. But we human beings do not construct the world we experience. In this respect a tree is very different from a circle. What we construct is never more than a similitude, an enigma, an image or picture. The form of such pictures should conform to the nature of the human spirit. They should thus be as comprehensible as possible. But they should not be confused with the things pictured. These we shall never adequately comprehend.

9. A Critique of Plato

1

Let me begin by returning to the Biblical passages referred to by the Orator in the very beginning of *De Staticis Experimentis*.

Proverbs 16: 11 A just balance and scale are the Lord's; all the weights in the bag are his work.

Wisdom: 11: 22 For the whole world before thee is as a little grain of the balance, yea, as a drop of the morning dew that falleth down upon the earth.

Proverbs 8: 28 – 29 When he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, I was beside him, like a master workman.

“I” here refers to wisdom, which in *Proverbs* 8: 22 is made to say: “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work.” What is expressed in these passages is something Cusanus no doubt would have endorsed. And he might have recalled this passage from Plato’s

Timaeus:

As I said at first, when all things were in disorder, God created in each thing in relation to itself, and in relation each other, all the measures and harmonies which they could possibly receive. For in those days nothing had any proportion except by accident, nor was there anything deserving to be called by the names we now use — as for example, fire, water, and the rest of the elements. All these the creator first set in order and out of them he constructed the universe,...¹⁰⁵

That is to say: the world is experienced by us as a world illuminated by a logos of which we are not the author. Creation declares the glory of God.

But this is to say that as an unfolding unity, the knowing *mens* is the image of that to us finally incomprehensible unfolding unity that is God. The mathematical order we discover in nature is not something that we simply read into it. It is genuinely discovered. This means that whatever presents itself to our senses must present itself as already illuminated by logos. If the mind is to gather some perceived manifold into a

¹⁰⁵ *Timaeus*, 69b-c, trans. Benjamin Jowett. See Elizabeth Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite: A Response to Blumenberg's Reading of Modernity*, dissertation, Yale University, 1995, pp. 113-114.

unity, that manifold must present itself as inviting such a gathering. The question is: how are we to think such a presentation? There must be a sense that what we experience must already be illuminated by logos for us to arrive at the proper measures and for these to have an application. But where does the mind find the principle for such a measure-taking and measuring? Where does it find the measure to take the measure of creation?

In his perspective construction, as we saw, 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, as I pointed out towards the end of the 7th seminar, 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. Let me look once more at the passages I read to you then, but now in more detail.

Know, too, that I have found, as it seems to me, a certain additional failing on the part of [those] seekers of the 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] 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]. But neither Plato nor anyone else whom I have read turned to those views that I presented in my fourth remark. 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. (DB 61, 62 [55])

The fourth point was the point, attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, that man is a second God. Cusanus challenges thus the Platonic claim that we have an intellectual vision of mathematics and of the other forms as independent realities. Mathematics has its

foundation in the unfolding of the human mind. And the same is said to hold of Plato's forms.

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 the 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. A similar point holds true regarding all other such things, regarding a circle, a line, a triangle, and regarding our numbers and other such things which have their beginning from our mind's concepts and which lack a nature. But it does not follow that the house which exists in terms of wood (i. e. the perceptible house) exists more truly in the mind — even though the form of the house is a truer form in the mind. For there is required — for the true being of the house and because of the end for the sake of which the house exists — that the house be perceptible. And so the house cannot have a form that exists as separated from it, as Aristotle rightly saw. Hence, although forms and numbers and all such intellectual entities (which are entities of our reason and which lack a nature) exist more truly in their beginning, viz. the human intellect. Nevertheless it does not follow that therefore all perceptible objects (whose essence it is to be perceptible) exist more truly in the intellect than in the senses. (DB 62 [56])

Unlike Plato and indebted no doubt to nominalism, Cusanus sees no reason to reify the idea of the house and to give it an independent reality. Plato's forms, just like mathematics, are understood as human creations. For Cusanus already, as later for Descartes, there is a sense, in which we understand things adequately only to the extent that we can make them. The question is how this is to be extended to things that, unlike the house, we have not made.

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 therefore only to be expected, given this understanding of the mind as an unfolding unity. That holds also for our attempts to understand the workings of nature, although the presupposition here is that our mind is the image of the mind the creator.

But it is important here to 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.

But let me return to Cusanus' critique of Plato.

And so, Plato is seen wrongly to have concluded — when he saw that mathematical entities, which are abstracted from perceptible objects, are truer in the mind, that they therefore have a still truer supra-intellectual being. But Plato could rightly have said that just as the forms of a [given] human art are true in their beginning, viz. in the human mind, than they are in matter, so the forms of nature's beginning (i. e. natural forms) are truer in that Beginning than they are outside it. And if the Pythagoreans, and whatever others, had reflected in the same way, they would have seen clearly that mathematical entities and numbers (which proceed from our mind and exist in the way in which we conceive them) are not substances or beginnings of perceptible things but are only the beginnings of rational entities of which we are the creators. (DB 62,63 [56])

While Cusanus clearly rejects Plato's understanding of mathematical, he seems more receptive to what Plato had said about the forms, to which he gives, as expected, a Christian reading. But the Pythagoreans, he suggests, were wrong to make numbers the principles of things and so are all neo-Pythagoreans.

Note how it is precisely the emphasis on the godlike creativity of the human mind that gives new weight to perception. But Plato was right to look beyond perceptible matter for what is its cause and rational ground.

Similarly, you see how it is that those things which cannot be made by our art exist more truly in perceptible objects than in our intellect. For example, fire has a truer existence in its perceptible substance than in our intellect, where it is present in a confused concept and apart from its natural reality [*naturalis veritas*]. The case is similar regarding all other [natural objects]. However, fire has [even] truer existence in its Creator, where it is present in its adequate Cause and Rational Ground. And although the Divine Intellect is not present together with its perceptible qualities, which we perceive in it, nevertheless it is not therefore any the less truly present there (just as a duke's dignity is present more truly in the king's dignity, even though it does not exist there with its ducal function). For in this perceptible world fire has its properties in regard to other perceptible objects; by means of these properties fire exercises its operations on other things. Since fire has these properties in regard to other things in this world, the properties do not unqualifiedly belong to its essence. Therefore, fire does not have need of these properties when it is freed from this exercise and from this world. Nor does it seek them in the intelligible world, where there is no contrariety, as Plato rightly said of a circle, that as it is described in the floor is full of contrarieties and is corruptible in accordance with spatial conditions but that in the intellect is free of these [conditions and contrarieties]. (DB 63 [57])

Note how Cusanus here collapses the distinction between a multiplicity of forms and God, has to collapse it, because in God all things are one. I shall return to this point next time. But here already let me turn to the question: how are we to think the presence of the creator, who is both cause and rational ground, in creatures?

The following paragraph takes up this challenge.

It seems good to add, further, as regards specific forms (since they are neither made or corrupted except accidentally, and since they are incorruptible likenesses of the divine infinite Intellect) how the following can be understood: viz., that the Divine Intellect shines forth in every specific form. For this [shining forth does] not [occur] in the way a single face appears in many mirrors but, rather, as a single infinite-magnitude [appears] in different finite magnitudes — and appears as a whole in each of them. I acknowledge that I conceive of this [appearing] in such a way that every finite specific form is as a triangle with respect to the triangle's surface magnitudes. For a triangle is the first finite and terminated magnitude; in it the infinite angle shines forth as a whole. (DB 63 [58])

Cusanus relies here once again on his mathematical symbolism.

For the infinite angle is both maximal and minimal; and so, it is infinite and immeasurable because it does not admit of more or less but is the beginning of all triangles. For we cannot [truly] say that two right angles are greater or lesser than the angle that is both maximal and minimal. For as long as the maximal angle is seen to be less than two right angles, it is not unqualifiedly maximal. But every triangle has three angles. Therefore in every triangle there shines forth, as a whole, the infinite beginning of all angles. (DB 63, 64 [58])

Does Cusanus' symbolism here help us? Just as one is for Cusanus not just another number, but constitutive of or present in every number, no less of the largest than the smallest, so the straight line, understood as the coincidence of the minimum and maximum angle, is thought to be the beginning of every triangle.

2

Let me return to our problem: how are we to understand the measuring of the *mens*, when it understands the things of the world. With this question in mind let me turn to the very opening of what I find perhaps the most challenging of Cusanus' works, the tetralogue *De Li Non Aliud*. Next time I shall return to that tetralogue, especially to the concluding chapters where he addresses Aristotle and Plato directly.

But since especially the beginning of this tetralogue is difficult and much of what Cusanus here has to say may well seem cryptic and unsupported, let me go very slowly.

First a word about the interlocutors: The first speaker is Abbot Andreas dei Bussi (1417-1475), also called Vigeuius after his birthplace Vigevano near Milan. Since 1458 he was the secretary and constant companion of Cusanus. He begins and concludes the tetralogue. We will hear more of him next time. Petrus Balbus describes himself as busy with the *Theology of Plato* by Proclus. Cusanus appears to have met him when he was studying in Padua, where Balbus was a student from 1415-25. He was known for his interest in mathematics and astronomy. The third interlocutor is Ferdinand Matim, Portuguese and the personal physician to the cardinal. With Toscanelli he is at Cusanus' bedside when he dies in Todi and witnesses his testament. He is the person to whom Toscanelli writes in 1474 to suggest that he should encourage Columbus to attempt to reach India by sailing West. It is Ferdinand who begins the discussion.

ABBOT: You know that we three, who are engaged in study and are permitted to converse with you, are occupied with deep matters. For I am busy with the *Parmenides* and with Proclus's commentary [thereon]; [Peter] is occupied with this same Proclus's *Theology of Plato*, which he is translating from Greek into Latin; Ferdinand is surveying the genius of Aristotle and you, when you have time, are busy with the theologian Dionysius the Areopagite. We would like to hear whether or not there occurs to you a briefer and clearer route to the points which are dealt with by the aforementioned individuals.

NICHOLAS: In our respective directions we are busy with deep mysteries. And it seems to me that no one can speak of these matters more briefly and clearly than those whom we are raiding. Nonetheless, I have sometimes thought that we have neglected a [point] which would lead us closer to what is sought.

PETER: We ask that this [point] be made known [to us].

FERDINAND: We are all so influenced by the truth that, knowing it to be discoverable everywhere, we desire to have that teacher who will place it before the eyes of our mind. Now, you show yourself tireless in your declining years; and you seem to grow young when, prodded, you discourse about the truth. So speak of that which you have reflected upon more than have we. (DNA 31 [1])

What does Ferdinand mean when he declares the truth to be discoverable everywhere? Recall the beginning of *Idiota de Sapientia*, where wisdom is said to cry out in the marketplace. Why then don't we see it? Apparently it does not lie open before

the *oculi mentis*, the eyes of the mind. We are all affected by a truth that yet eludes us. The interlocutors want to learn about this elusive truth. What makes it so elusive? Is it our way of seeing?

The statement that truth is knowable is really a tautology. Think one more of the definition: *veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*. To speak of the truth of things is to think them as open to mind. Truth is presence to mind. If truth is understood as *adaequatio rei et intellectus* it has its measure in the coincidence of the two. That is what lets the young Nietzsche say in *On Truth and Lie* that “the pure truth, apart from any of its consequences” would be nothing other than the thing in itself, something he calls “quite incomprehensible to the creator of language and something not in the least worth striving for.”¹⁰⁶ Cusanus, to be sure, is of another mind.

The question is: is this truth in any way present to *our* mind? Our ability to grasp the truth is limited by our finite understanding. But to think our understanding as thus limited is to measure it by a greater truth, requiring us to think of a greater mind. Again we encounter the abyss that separates the infinite and the finite.

The cardinal agrees to the request:

NICHOLAS: I shall speak and converse with you, Ferdinand, [but only] on the following condition: viz. that unless you are compelled by reason, you will reject as unimportant everything you will hear from me. (DNA 33 [2])

Hopkins' footnote refers us to Anselm's *Monologion*, which had been written at the request of certain monks of Bec, who wanted to be given a model about how to meditate on the existence and essence of God, where everything was to be based on reason and nothing on Scriptural authority. But we should also look forward to Descartes. At issue is the problem of the authority of Scripture. How is it to figure in philosophy.

FERDINAND: My teachers, the philosophers, have taught that one ought to proceed in this way.

NICHOLAS: I ask you, then, first of all, what is it that most of all gives us knowledge?

FERDINAND: Definition.

NICHOLAS: You answer correctly. For the definition is the constituting ground (*oratio seu ratio*). But on what basis is definition called definition?

¹⁰⁶ Daniel Breazeale, *Philosophy and Truth: Selections From Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1979), p. 82

“Definition” here does not mean conceptual determination. As Cusanus, following the tradition uses it, definition aims at the essence of something. In this connection the expression *oratio seu ratio* which Hopkins translates as “constituting ground” invites reflection. A more literal translation would be “verbal expression or reason,” where reason is understood as what determines the essence of something. The phrase raises the question of the relationship of language to reason or logos. Heidegger thus distinguishes in *Being and Time* between discourse or *Rede*, his translation of logos, and language or *Sprache*, and inquires into their relation.

FERDINAND: On the basis of defining, since it defines everything.

NICHOLAS: Perfectly correct. Hence, if definition defines everything, then does it define even itself?

FERDINAND: Certainly, since it excludes nothing.

NICHOLAS: Do you see, then, that the definition which defines everything is not other than what is defined. (DNA 33 [2,3])

Jasper Hopkins in his Introduction calls Cusanus’s notion of definition bizarre.

We cannot seriously regard as a definition the sentence “The sky is not other than the sky” or the sentence “The earth is not other than the earth. Moreover, no one could rightly agree with the unqualified claim, advanced in Chapter 1, that “definition defines everything.” And derision is surely invited by Ferdinand’s suggestion, in Chapter 19, that if Aristotle had understood the truth about Not-other, he would “not have had need either of an elaborate logic or of the difficult art of definition...” (DNA 4)

And yet, if we don’t understand what Cusanus is after here, we won’t be able to get into this text. What Hopkins calls “bizarre” is demanded by what is to be said.

What then do we mean by definition? Here Aristotle:

Topics VII, 5, 155 a 31: a definition is an account indicating the essence of a thing. To indicate the essence of a thing is to indicate what it is in truth.

Met. Z 6, 1031 b 6, 20: For there is knowledge of each thing only when we know its essence.

Note again that the point of definition, so understood, is not to answer the question: “what do you mean by ‘X?’” but “what is X.” Definition aims at the truth of things. The perfect definition would then be identical with what the thing is in truth, i.e. with the thing thought as open to mind. For the Christian this must be thought as the Divine Word.

How then are we to understand Ferdinand's statement that definition is called so on the basis of defining? Everything that is has been made definite. Everything that is for us has been made definite by us. But there would be no truth in our definitions were these no somehow grounded in the real definitions. Note the slippage from the human to the divine word.

NICHOLAS: Do you see, then, that the definition which defines everything is not other than what is defined.

FERDINAND: I see [this] , since [this definiton] is the definition of itself. But I do not see what this definiton is. (DNA 33 [3])

Hopkins seems to have reason to call this bizarre. Our definition of a rose is different from the rose. But remember that for Cusanus an adequate definition captures the truth of what it defines. But is the essence of the rose, its constituting ground, different from the rose?

This brings to mind a poem by Angelus Silesius:

Die Rose ist ohne Warum.
 Sie blühet, weil sie blühet.
 Sie achtet nicht ihrer selbst,
 fragt nicht, ob man sie siehet.

The rose is without a why
 It blooms because it blooms
 It does not consider itself
 Does not ask whether one sees it.

But so understood the definition of the rose is of course not the definition that defines everything. That definition would have to also define itself, since to think it, it too would have to be given definition. What we are attempting to think here is the ground of definition. The ground of definition is the definition of definition, which is the essence of language and at the same time the ground of the essence of things and of the belonging together of these two essences. In seeking that essence we are seeking at the same time what lets everything be just the thing it is.

Ferdinand has difficulty following the cardinal. In this respect he appears not so very different from Hopkins.

NICHOLAS: I express it to you most plainly. (This is what I said we have neglected and passed over in the course of tracking down what is sought.)

FERDINAND: When did you express [it]?

NICHOLAS: Just now, when I said that the definition which defines everything is not other than what is defined.

FERDINAND: I do not yet understand you.

NICHOLAS: The few things which I have stated are easily investigated. Among them you will find Not-other. And if with all your might you turn the gaze of your mind toward *Not-other*, you will see with me the definition which defines itself and everything. (DNA 33 [3,4])

Cusanus suggests that in Not-other he has found the definition of definition. The statement is puzzling. Aristotle had defined the definition as an account indicating the essence of something. A good definition should do this by indicating a higher genus and the specific difference. A definition is in answer to the question: what is X? The answer has the form X is Y. The definition makes the X, the thing under discussion, definite. To make definite is to oppose it to what it is not. The definition posits something to have a definite character. Definition is heterothesis. Implicit in the ascription of a definite character is a difference: X is not that. Identity and difference belong together. Both have their ground in definition: *Idem* — *alter*, the same — another. We are moving here in the space of always already defined entities. Creation can be understood as definition.

We should note that the title of the tetralogue is not: *de li non alterum*, but *de li non aliud*. But what is the difference between *alter* and *aliud*. *Alter* means the determinate other, the second, one among others. *Aliud* is less definite; it can mean another, but also simply other.

All of this suggests that the couple *idem-alter* cannot be fundamental. Presupposing definition it will not allow us to think the ground of definition. The very idea of making something definite presupposes what is other, something indefinite. Think of the creation account Plato gives us in the *Timaeus*. It presupposes that a limit is imposed on something determinable: so understood definition for the first time lets a definite entity appear. The *idem-alter* polarity has its foundation in the *unum-aliud*, *peras-apeiron* polarity. The law of identity and the law of non-contradiction are constitutive only of the humanly comprehended phenomenal world of finite things. The law of the excluded middle is constitutive of that world thought as closed, and determinate.

But what then is then is the point of the *non aliud*? The formulation appears at first completely empty. If we think *unum* as the defining one, and *aliud* as the determinable *apeiron* or the indefinite, must not the *idem* and the *alter* both be part of the *non aliud*, of what is already determined? But perhaps we are still lacking the intellectual eyeglasses of *De Beryllo*. We are thinking the *non aliud* in terms of the law of identity. But must the *non aliud* not be thought in a way that is more fundamental than that law?

It is not surprising that Ferdinand has trouble following:

FERDINAND: Teach us how to do it; for what you answer is important, though not yet plausible.

NICHOLAS: Tell me, then, what is Not-other. Is it other than Not-other?

FERDINAND: Not at all other.

NICHOLAS: So [it is] Not-other.

FERDINAND: This is certain.

Nicholas: The define *Not-other*.

FERDINAND: Indeed, I see clearly now that Not-other is not other than Not-other. No one will deny this.

NICHOLAS: You speak the truth. Don't you now see most assuredly that *Not-other* defines itself, since it cannot be defined by means [any] other?

FERDINAND: I see [this] assuredly. But it is not yet evident that *Not-other* defines everything.

NICHOLAS: Nothing is easier to recognize. For what would you answer if someone asked you, "What is *other*?" Would you not reply, "Not other than other"? Likewise, [if someone asked you] "What is the sky?" would you not reply, "Not other than the sky."

(34, 35 [4, 5])

Isn't Cusanus just equivocating: the sky is nothing other than the sky: is it therefore not-other? But the *non aliud* is not something other than the sky, nor something other than other. But how then are we to understand the *non* in *non aliud*?

Cusanus has offered us the definition of definition in the sense of leading us to the ground of definition. That ground is sought in the *non aliud*, which answers to an intuition of being that necessarily transcends the reach of our language. That in thinking that ground language should curl back on itself as it does in this essay is only to be expected. The bizarre character of what Cusanus has to say noted by Hopkins is essential. The seemingly emptiest tautology is offered by Cusanus as a definition of God.

10. Plato's Forms Reconsidered

1

Let me begin by summing up some of the points I have been making.

1. Consider once more the medieval understanding of every *ens* as *verum*, true. To make sense of this let us keep in mind the Thomistic definition of truth: *veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*. This is to say then that thinking and being belong together. In Cusanus' words: *omnia quae sunt intelligibilia sunt* (LG 2, 238). We can look back all the way to Parmenides: *tò gàr auto noein estin te kai einai* or forward to Heidegger's *Identität und Differenz*. We may want to speak of the nexus of being and knowing.

2. This nexus poses the following difficulty: if knowing is thought to be constitutive of the known how is error possible? Any account which makes man a second God can therefore not mean that man is creative in the way God is said to be. In human knowing the object of thought is transcended by something. That something may present itself to us in ways that eventually lead us to admit that we were mistaken. Knowledge of reality has to recognize the transcendence of the real. We may want to develop this in terms of the distinction between appearance and thing in itself. The understanding of every *ens* as *verum* can only apply to the thing in itself. That is why Kant understands the thing in itself as a *noumenon*, relating it to *nous*.

3. The thing in itself, transcending as it does, what our understanding can comprehend, cannot be known in that sense. Yet it must be apprehended in some fashion if the aboutness of experience, or the givenness of the given is to be preserved. In an openness to the gift of phenomena, the thing in itself is apprehended. Heidegger will speak in this connection of the earth. Cusanus will speak of a knowing that is also a not knowing.

4. The object of knowledge, I said, is transcended by the thing in itself, and the latter must present itself to me in some fashion if the givenness of what I experience, a sense of the gift of being, is to be preserved: I see the tree. What is the tree? First of all an appearance, a phenomenon, to which I have assigned a place in my linguistic space, but part of the phenomenon is that it points beyond itself, to the thing in itself. And for the medieval thinker what I have called here the thing in itself is the tree as known by

God, the coincidence of being and thinking in God. It has its ground in the unity of the Father, responsible for the being of things, and the son, the Word, the Logos, responsible for its intelligibility.

5. With the *non aliud* Cusanus attempts to think this finally incomprehensible ground of all we can understand.

2

But let me return to what Hopkins calls the bizarre character of Cusanus' thought. And let me do so by turning very briefly to the critique of Aristotle found in chapters 18 and 19. Again Ferdinand is the interlocutor:

FERDINAND: Let us now, if you have the time, explore various written statements (statements perhaps not unworthy of this beginning of ours) of the greatest and most acute Peripatetic, viz., Aristotle. Since he is not altogether unknown to you, tell [me], I ask, what the Philosopher was so concerned to show us.

NICHOLAS: I surely think [he wanted to show us] what he had found out regarding knowledge of the truth.

FERDINAND: What, then, had he found out?

NICHOLAS: Indeed, to be candid, I do not know. But he says that quiddity, which is the object of the intellect and which is always sought, has never been found. For in First Philosophy he says: "It is [a question] very difficult for all and very much in doubt: namely, whether or not one and being are not something other but are the substance of beings, as the Pythagoreans and Plato said, or whether there is some other substance (*subjectum*); for example, Empedocles speaks of friendship; another speaks of fire; another, of water; and another, of air." And elsewhere in the same book the same [philosopher says]: "In time past, as now and always, it is asked, and is ever in doubt, what being is—i.e., what substance is. Some say that it is one thing, others that it is many things." (DNA 125 [83])

Cusanus' admission that he did not quite know what Aristotle had found out is remarkable, given the significance Aristotle had for medieval philosophy. Ever since the beginning of the 13th century — think of what occurred at the university of Paris, of names such as Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas — Aristotle had come to be thought of as *the* philosopher, becoming even more important than the Platonic, Neo-Platonic tradition. But it is the latter that is invoked by this dialogue, where such reassertion is also

an assertion of very modern themes. Still, the cardinal's statement that he is unaware of what he owes to Aristotle is astonishing. In the library in Kues there are still seven codices with translations of Aristotle's writings, including the *Metaphysics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*. And in quite a number of places Cusanus refers the reader to Aristotle. His marginal comments in the manuscripts tend, however, to be critical. Cusanus knows very well who his spiritual precursors are: Plato, Proclus, Dionysius, Eriugena, and Meister Eckhart

Book VII of the *Metaphysics* begins by calling attention to the many senses in which a thing may be said to be. Aristotle then goes on to say "That which is primarily and *is* simply (not *is* something) must be substance."

Metaphysics VII, 1, 1028b3-8: And indeed the question which, both now and of old, has always been raised and always been the subject of doubt, viz. what being is, is just the question: what is substance? For it is this that some assert to be one, others more than one, and that some assert to be limited in number, others unlimited. And also we must consider chiefly and primarily and almost exclusively what that is which is in this sense.

Cusanus suggests that *non aliud* is the answer to this old question, essentially the same question, we may note, that introduces Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Cusanus suggests that Aristotle showed that the *ratio* is not capable of arriving at an adequate understanding of Being.

NICHOLAS: I will do my best. I will consider his inquiring whether one and being are not something other but are the substance of beings—his having sought, through Not-other, the substance of things. For he saw that the substance of things is not anything other; and so, with regard to being and one and friendship and air and water and all things, he was uncertain whether any of these is the substance of things, since he recognized that all of them are something other. Therefore, he presupposed that the substance of things exists and that there is not more than one substance. However, like all the others, he was uncertain what this substance is. As he inquired, he encountered all those who gave substance various names; and he asked whether it had been rightly named by anyone. And, at last, it seemed to him that no one had named it correctly. For whoever named it, named something other (*aliquid aliud sive quid aliud*) and not that most simple quiddity-of-things, which Aristotle saw not to be able to be anything other. And he did not stray in this matter; but he stopped there, as had

other men. For he saw that no rational mode of pursuit sufficed at all
(DNA 127 [84])

The *ratio*, our reason, is incapable of grasping the being of things. But this is not our highest faculty. Higher than *ratio* is *intuitio*. Into the translation of the *Metaphysics* he owned Cusanus wrote down the following remark:

It is evident that in theological matters there is greater certitude than in mathematics; and it is not true that the first certitude (*prima certitudo*) is to be found in mathematics, unless we add, that certitude to which the *ratio* can attain. Contemplation is the true certitude, because as an intellectual vision it presupposes nothing, nor does it prove or inquire, but is simple intuition.¹⁰⁷

The ground of our being cannot be reached by the *ratio*. This Aristotle failed to recognize. His focus on entities blinded him. He was not as open, a Heideggerian might say, to the ontological difference, the difference between Being and beings, as he might have been.

FERDINAND: I see that there has happened to the Philosopher what you spoke of earlier.

NICHOLAS: What was that?

FERDINAND: That if someone seeks to see what the substance of visible things is, then if he seeks this substance among visible things and by means of sight, he does not attend to perceiving antecedently the light without which he could not either seek or find what is visible. But if he were to attend to this light, then he would stop seeking [it] in something that is other. Surely, such a thing happened to the Philosopher; for when with his mind he sought the quiddity of things, the light which is signified by “Not-other” presented itself to him as that without which he could not at all make his discovery. Notwithstanding, he did not notice that the light, which was not other than what was sought, was not an other. But because through Not-other he sought an other, he found only what is other than others. Hence, in his inquiry he found [only] what is very far removed from this [i.e., from Not-other].

NICHOLAS: You speak the truth. For surely he would not have gone astray, and he would have cut short such extensive efforts, if he had recognized that the light which he mentally saw to be the means of arriving at the sought-after beginning was also the end.
(DNA 128-129 [84. 85])

¹⁰⁷ Nikolaus von Cues, *Vom Nichtanderen*, trans. Paul Wilpert (Hamburg: Meiner, 1952), p. 198, note 2

Cusanus opposes his own approach to that of Aristotle, which he criticizes for failing to inquire into what is presupposed by and therefore inaccessible to the *ratio*. Ferdinand draws the conclusion that thinking transcends the reach of the *ratio*. To recognize this is to become learned about one's ignorance. This again invites to be read in the context of the theme of humility and pride. There is a knowing in humility and a knowing in pride. The knowing in humility accepts the groundlessness of human knowledge. There is no *fundamentum* the *ratio* can secure. But does the *non aliud* offer such a *fundamentum*?

The discussion turns in the next chapter to the principle of non-contradiction as to the cornerstone of Aristotle's thinking and of the work of the *ratio*:

NICHOLAS: You display extraordinary affection toward the admirable Philosopher, who seems indeed to have been endowed with very clear reasoning. But presumably the same [claim] can be made for all the speculative philosophers. For clear reasoning is a facility with difficult matters. [It is the facility] which directed speculating [philosophers] to the truth indubitable to all mental sight—[the truth] than which (in my judgment) none more brief or more concise can be either taught or apprehended. Only this truth is perfect; no human being can possibly add anything to it. For it directs sight to the Beginning, so that one who meditates thereupon is delighted and is constantly nourished and grows. No other discoverable teaching is perfect, absolute, and complete. For whatever is investigated by reason but yet is not seen by the acute gaze of the mind's eye has not yet reached ultimate certainty, even though it may seem to come very close to the truth. But the certainty which is ultimate and entirely perfect is identical with seeing. (DNA 131 [87])

“Clear reasoning” (*ratione lucidissima*): that suggests that any philosophy limited by the *ratio* will fail to seize what it seeks. Cusanus calls his own truth brief and perfect. But in what sense is it perfect? What kind of sight is granted by the *non aliud*?

Ferdinand draws the consequences:

FERDINAND: All that you say is surely so. The Philosopher certain seems throughout his lifetime (1) to have concerned himself with eliciting from reason a way, or an art, for pursuing the substance of things and (2) to have come upon none which sufficed. For not even reason attains to what precedes reason; and even less can any of the arts produced by reason furnish a way to what is unknown to all reason. The Philosopher held it to be most certain that an affirmation contradicts a negation and that both cannot at the same time be said of the same thing, since they are contradictories. He said this on the basis of reason's concluding it to be true. But if someone had asked Aristotle, “What is other?” he surely could have answered truly, “It is not other than other.” And, if the questioner had

thereupon added, “Why is other other?” Aristotle could rightly have answered as at first, “Because it is not other than other.” And thus, he would have seen that Not-other and other do not contradict each other as contradictories. And he would have seen that that to which he gives the name “the first principle” (*primum principium*) does not suffice for showing the way to the truth which the mind contemplates beyond reasoning. (DNA 131 [88])

Is this a specious argument? Consider what Aristotle had written in *Metaphysics* IV, 3, 1005b 14-24:

For a principle which everyone must have who knows anything about being, is not a hypothesis; and that which everyone must have who knows anything, he must already have when he comes a to a special study. Evidently then such a principle is the most common of all; which principle this is we proceed to say. It is, that the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject in the same respect.

Cusanus does not deny that the principle of non-contradiction governs the *ratio*. But reflection, he insists, is capable of transcending the *ratio*.

Questioning the principle of non-contradiction had been a central theme in Cusanus’ thought ever since *On Learned Ignorance*. Johannes Wenck notes this in his attack on the book, suggesting that Cusanus may be a false prophet, all too close to Meister Eckhart, whose teaching had been rightly condemned:

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. ... 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. (OUL 23 [21-22])

In his apology Cusanus does not really answer Wenck. He rather dismisses him, suggesting that the wise had always known that mystical teaching should not come into the hands of the unknowing, that even Christ taught that a pearl should not be cast before swine.

But the Aristotelian sect now prevails. This sect regards as heresy [the method of] the coincidence of opposites. (Yet, the endorsement of this [method] is the beginning of the ascent unto mystical theology.) Hence, this method (via), which is completely tasteless to those nourished in this sect, is pushed far from them, as being contrary to their undertaking. Hence, it would be comparable to a miracle—just as it would be the transformation of the sect—for them to reject Aristotle and to leap higher.” (APOL 46 [6])

While Cusanus does not deny the principle of non-contradiction as a principle governing the *ratio*, he does insist that reflection is capable of transcending the *ratio*. Such reflection must also leave behind the principle of non-contradiction. To the Aristotelian Cusanus’ use of language here must seem a game, born of an irresponsible desire to speculate, *curiositas vana*, as Wenck charges. Cusanus could reply that God cannot be found in the logical space ruled by the *ratio*. He dwells beyond the coincidence of opposites.

But does this make any sense? And what could such a transcendent God have to do with us? More especially, how can this transcendent God provide human beings with anything resembling a measure? The question: where does the *mens* find its *measure*, it would seem, has not so much been answered as left behind.

3

Let me return to something I said in the very beginning of this session. I suggested that for Cusanus a presupposition of human knowing is the unity of the Father, responsible for the being of things, and the son, the Word, responsible for its intelligibility. How is this unity to be thought? Cusanus attempts to think it in terms of the *non aliud*. But how is that to be thought? Let me return to this question: How are we to understand the *non* in *non aliud*? How is *non aliud* to be distinguished from identity? If every property of x is also a property of y, we say x and y are identical. We may prove this by saying x has the property of being identical with x. If y has all the 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 comparable to being red. Perhaps some of us are misled here by the similarity 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 perhaps say that A is identical with itself. If this is a property, it is a rather odd property that adds nothing to its determinations. As Kant said about being, it has its foundation in a thing's being posited. All the argument therefore allows us to say is that x is identical with itself. Cusanus might say that two objects that share all their properties are indistinguishable, identical as far as we can tell, in an epistemological sense, but to assert an ontological identity would be futile.

The *idem* results from a positing. But this positing is itself directed toward something. It presupposes the *non aliud*. The *non aliud* is something like an ontological counterpart to identity. It relates to the *idem* as thing in itself relates to appearance.

How then is the *non* to be understood? In terms of the *idem* and *alter*? Every determination is said to be a negation. Negation is here defined by the *principium contradictionis*. If this were applied to the *aliud*, the *non aliud* would be excluded by the *aliud*. But this is not the case, Cusanus insists. The other is nothing other than the other. The *aliud* participates in the *non aliud*. The is at the heart of Cusanus' critique of Aristotle.

4

The discussion turns to Plato in chapters 20 and 21. The interlocutor here is Petrus Balbus of Pisa. Cusanus appears to have gotten to know him while a student at Padua. He was made a bishop very shortly after the date of this tetralogue, which appears to have taken place in January 1462. At the time of this conversation he was busy translating Proclus's *Platonic Theology*. The translation has survived in Kues.

Petrus begins by remarking on the similarity between Dionysius and Proclus:

PETER BALBUS OF PISA: I have been listening to you, Father, discussing with Ferdinand many [points] which are very satisfying to me; I especially admired what you cited from the books of the greatest theologian, Dionysius. For I recently have been translating Proclus the Platonist from Greek into Latin.

[While translating] in the book on the theology of the divine Plato, I discovered these very [points], with virtually the same manner and tenor of expression. Accordingly, I would like to hear from you something about the *Theology of Plato* also. (DNA 133-135 [90])

We know now that Proclus was the source of the thinker now called the Pseudo-Dionysius, who was of course not a student of the Apostle Paul, but lived around 500 (Proclus 410-485). Lorenzo Valla was the first to call the identification of Dionysius with the Dionysius mentioned in the New Testament into question. But in a marginal note to a translation of Pseudo-Dionysius Cusanus already wonders why Ambrosius, Augustine and, Jerome don't seem to be aware of the works of Pseudo-Dionysius, which suggests some doubt on his part. Yet this does not seem to have been of sufficient weight to lead the cardinal to challenge the identification of the two here.¹⁰⁸

Peter calls attention to the way both Dionysius and Proclus distinguished between the one which exists and the *unum simpliciter* (DNA 135 [90]). With this we come to a topic dear to Cusanus:

NICHOLAS: Perhaps all the sages wanted to make the same point about the first principle of things [*primum principium rerum*] and various of them expressed it variously. But Plato—whom Proclus so greatly exalts (as if he were a humanified god) and who was always looking to what is anterior—endeavored to see the substance of things before everything nameable. Hence, since he saw that a thing which is corporeal and divisible cannot exist from itself and cannot conserve itself (because of its weakness and fluxibility): prior to any material object he saw the soul, and prior to the soul he saw intellect, and prior to intellect he saw the One. (DNA 135 [91])

Plato is here seen with the eyes of Proclus who followed Plotinus. We thus get the hierarchy: material object (inanimate) – soul (animate) – intellect (spiritual) – One. It would be hard to support this with a quote from Plato. And Nicholas continues, citing Plato through Proclus:

Now, what is posterior exists by means of participation in what is prior. Hence, what is the first (by participation in the first all things are what they are) is seen prior to intellect; for it is not at all the case that all things participate in intellect. Therefore, intellect does not attain to “what is earlier, or older, than intellect itself”—to use his words. (DNA 135 [92])

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 202-203, note 4.

Proclus had written:

Proclus, *Elem. Theol.* Prop. 20: And everything that is in any way, participates in the one; but not everything in Nous. . . . And matter participates in the One and everything that is; but not everything participates in the intellect and the intelligible kinds and genera.

Mind is understood by Cusanus here as capable of transcending the intellect:

Wherefore, I think that Plato mentally viewed the substance, or the beginning (*principium*), of things by way of revelation—in the manner in which the Apostle tells the Romans that God has revealed Himself to them. (DNA 127 [92])

The reference here is to *Romans* I, 19:

For what can be known to God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 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.

Cusanus understands this in the image of light, which is the condition of seeing, and yet is itself not seen. Similarly God is the condition of understanding, but Himself not understood.

In his letters Plato very briefly declares that these matters are thus—saying that God eventually manifests Himself to one who seeks Him steadfastly and very vigilantly. (Proclus, too, repeats these [views] in his Commentary on the Parmenides.) Therefore, since [Plato] believes these [views] to be true, he says that the soul—which contemplates itself and enfolds within itself (in the way a soul does) the things posterior [to itself]— beholds, as in a living mirror, all the things which participate in its life and which through it live and exist vitally. And because these things are in the soul, the soul, by means of the resemblance to itself, ascends upward toward the things which are prior [to it]—just as Proclus cites these [doctrines] in his theology. (DNA 135-135 [92])

Grasping itself as the one that enfolds all things known within it, the soul understands the relationship of all things to their divine origin in its own image.

Peter proceeds to ask how this relates what Cusanus has said about the *non aliud*.

The answer is expected:

NICHOLAS: It will readily be clear to one who considers it. For as [Proclus] says, it is necessary that the Cause of all things be participated in by all things. And so, the One (which he says to be prior to the one which exists as one) is not other than the existing one, since it is the Cause of the existing one. Therefore, to the Cause of the existing one he gives the name “One,” in order to express Notother. (DNA 137 [93])

Cause here is understood in terms of the Neo-Platonic doctrine of participation. In this thing the One is nothing other than this thing, as in this red thing redness is nothing other

than this red. This may be understood as a reflection of the being of Plato's forms. The cause of this thing's redness is nothing other than this redness. We are not dealing here with two things. Similarly the cause of the Kantian phenomenon is nothing other than the thing in itself. We are not dealing here with two things.

Peter has trouble following and Cusanus points out that this is so in the very nature of what is here to be thought:

NICHOLAS: If you were able to conceive it, then by no means would it be the Beginning-of-all-things, which signifies all in all. For every human concept is a concept of some one thing. But Not-other is prior to [every] concept, since a concept is not other than a concept. Therefore, Not-other may be called the Absolute Concept, which is indeed seen mentally but which, notwithstanding, is not conceived. (DNA 137, 139 [94])

5

Peter next turns to the question: what does the *quam* mean when we say *terra non est aliud quam terra*. Cusanus answers that it is not part of the definition, that it has an apophantic function: it directs our sight:

NICHOLAS: Because it directs our sight. For when I say that Notother is not other than Not-other, the word "than" simply directs sight to Not-other insofar as it is prior to other. But when I say "Other is not other than other," [the word "than"] directs sight to Not-other insofar as in an other it is the other. And when I say "The earth is not other than the earth," [the word "than"] directs sight to Not-other insofar as in the earth it is earth. And in like manner for all things.

PETER: Very good, indeed! For now I see that to the question "What is the earth?" the answer "The earth is not other than the earth" displays the acute mental gaze by which the mind sees the following: that the Beginning of all things—which is signified by "Not-other" defines "earth" (i.e., that in the earth Not-other is the earth). But if the question "Why is the earth the earth?" is asked, then the answer "Because it is not other than the earth" ought to be given. For the earth is the earth because its Beginning, or Cause, is, in the earth, the earth. (DNA 139-141 [95-96])

Compare with this Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 6.44: Not *how* the world is is the mystical, but *that* it is.

Cusanus then brings the discussion back to Plato:

NICHOLAS: You have explored [the matter], Peter; and you see that the Beginning-of-all is signified by "Not-other" and, consequently, is not other than anything but is all in all.

Turn back now to Plato, whose intention was to view the Beginning, which is all in all. Accordingly, he did not at all regard any of the things which can exist in different ways—e.g., figure, name definition, concept (*ratio*), opinion, and the like—as showing quiddity; for the essence, and quiddity, of things precedes all these. Therefore, antecedently to these things which are other and changeable and variable, he saw that what is prior to other is the Substance of all substances and the Quiddity of all quiddities. Since in all things this [Substance or Quiddity] is all these things, it is that which is signified by “Not-other.” Hence, he saw that within the First all things are the First; and he saw that all things emanate from the First (as from a fount or a cause) and on account of the First. (DNA 141-2 [97])

— A small question here: does “on account of” capture the meaning of *gratia*? “Thanks to” might be better: we should hear in *gratia* “grace.”

Petrus then brings the discussion to Plato’s second letter, 312 e. Dionysius had declared himself not satisfied with Plato’s demonstration of the first principle and Plato answers with a riddle to make sure that the answer not be misunderstood by those not suited to it:

It is like this. It is in relation to the king of all and on his account that everything exists, and that fact is the cause of all that is beautiful. [I want to underscore the occurrence of “beautiful” here. Given Cusanus’ reading of this passage, it suggests a connection between his understanding of the beautiful and the *non aliud*, to which I shall return.] In relation to a second, the second class of things exists, and in relation to a third, the third class. Now the mind of man, when it has to do with them, endeavors to gain a knowledge of their qualities, fixing its attention on the things with which it has itself some affinity; these, however, are in no case adequate. In regard to the king and the things I mentioned there is nothing like this. Thereupon the soul says: But what are they like?” This question, thou son of Dionysius and Doris, or rather the travail this question occasions in the soul — is the cause of all the trouble, and if that be not expelled from a man, he shall never genuinely find the truth.¹⁰⁹

Cusanus gives us his own interpretation of the riddle.

NICHOLAS: He saw the different modes-of-being of things. For prior to other, he saw everything as the most simple Beginning, in which everything-that-exists-differently-in-another is discerned as Not-other. For example, when I turn my attention from the earth (which by rational sight I see to be something other than not-earth or sky or fire) to

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viewing the earth in the Beginning, I do not see it there as other than not-earth; for I see it as the Beginning, which is not other than anything. [I do] not [mean] that I see it in a more imperfect manner than at first; rather, [I mean that I see it] in a most precise and most true manner. For each thing is seen most precisely when it is seen as Not-other. For example, he who sees the earth in such way that he sees it as Not-other sees it most precisely. And this is to see the Quiddity both of its quiddity and of all things.

Another [kind of seeing] is the seeing of the quiddity of the earth. The earth's quiddity is seen by the intellect to be other than the quiddity of water or of fire. Moreover, the earth's quiddity is posterior to Not-other, because it is other than other [quiddities]; and this is the second, or the intellectual, mode-of-being of quiddity. But the third mode-of-being is such as is attained by the soul's discriminating (in the way souls do) between this and that—according as the thing (or the thing's quiddity) is perceived.

Presumably, Plato wanted to make either the foregoing points or deeper ones. He disclosed his secret very tersely and cautiously; and with his few words he stimulated the sharpest intelligence of many [others]. (DNA 143 [98]).

11. “Tota pulchra es, amica mea”

1

Last time we concluded by looking at some passages where Cusanus clarifies his relationship to Plato. This theme is picked up in chapter 23 by abbot John Andrea, who had opened the dialogue and told us that he was busy with Plato’s *Parmenides* and Proclus’s commentary. From 1458, until the death of Cusanus, as I mentioned, he was his secretary and constant companion.

ABBOT JOHN ANDREA: Often in the past and also especially just now, I have heard you, Father, conveying to us the vision of your mind. [I have heard] you directing this [mental vision] toward the First, which is all in all, that than which something prior cannot be conceived, and that to which you give the name “Not-other.” However, you also maintain that the First is seen prior to everything nameable. These [two claims] certainly seem to me to be opposed. (DNA 145 [99])

The description of God as “All in all,” *omnia in omnibus*, had been cited before in the tetraogue, in Nicholas’ florilegium of passages culled from the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius.:

In the same [chapter 12 of *The Divine Names*]: “But God is called Other [*alterum!*] because He is present to all things by virtue of Providence and because for the well being of all He becomes all in all, while remaining in Himself and [retaining] His own identity.” (DNA 109 [68]).

Hopkins instead refers us to I *Cor.* 15, 28:

When all things are subjected to him, the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to every one.

Here The Latin text: *cum autem subiecta fuerint illi omnia tunc ipse Filius subiectus erit illi qui sibi subiecit omnia ut sit Deus*. The Biblical reference suggests the subjection of the Word, the logos, to God.

The abbot points to what to him seems a contradiction: how can that which is prior to every name be named. Cusanus’ answer is not unexpected:

NICHOLAS: You remember well, Father Abbot, what you have heard. But I certainly do not mean that “Not-other” is the name of that whose name is above every name. Rather, through “Not-other” I disclose to you the name of my concept of the First. There does not

occur to me any more precise name which expresses my concept of the Unnamable, which, indeed, is not other than anything. (DNA 145 [99])

Again the reference given by Hopkins is worth following up on:

Phil. 2, 2-10: Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. [The divine Word emptied itself to be born in the likeness of men.] And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the Glory of God the Father. [Jesus is man and God, finite and infinite. The finite here cannot be other than the infinite.]

Note how Cusanus here reminds us of his own perspective: he disavows the standpoint of the absolute.

Interesting is the abbot's response:

ABBOT: I would wonder—except for the fact that Plato also said almost the same thing in the *Parmenides* and that the commentator Proclus clarified his unclear statement—how that which you view before and above every other could be Not-other, given that Not-other seems to be opposed to other. It is true that, in these respective works, both Plato and Proclus discuss one and other [*de uno et altero*], stating that one [of them] cannot possibly be other than the other [of them]. [*impossibile unum ab alteru alterum esse*] Nevertheless, you, because of the more precise expression of your concept, make me see clearly by means of “Not-other” that Not-other cannot be other than any other, whether nameable or unnameable; for “Notother” defines all things in such way that in all things it is all things. But Dionysius the Areopagite said that even God is called Other—something which is denied in the *Parmenides*. (DNA 145 [100])

Consider *Parmenides* 139 b 1 55:

Further: the one cannot be either the same as another or the same as itself, nor yet other than itself or other than another.

a) Were it other than itself, it would be other than one and so would not be one. b) And if it were the same as another, it would be that other and not itself, so that in this case again it would be just what it is, one, but other than one.

Therefore the one will not be the same as another or other than itself.

c) Nor can it be other than another, so long as it is one... if as itself it is not in any sense other, it cannot be other than anything.

d) Nor can it yet be the same as itself. For the character (*phusis*) of unity is one thing, the character of sameness another. This is evident because when a thing becomes ‘the same’ as something it does not become ‘one.’¹¹⁰

The passage from Dionysius is the already cited passage from the florilegium of Dionysian texts.

Cusanus reconciles Plato and Dionysius:

NICHOLAS: As you recall, I believe, Plato denies any attaining of a thing’s definition, because (as Proclus, too, explains) the definition circumscribes the quiddity. Hence, this kind of defining is not what takes place when Not-other defines itself and all things. For Not-other defines the quidditative beginning not as does someone who determines, or defines, a triangular surface by means of circumscribing lines but as if someone constructed a surface which is called a triangle. But you see from the following [consideration] that Plato and Dionysius are not opposed to each other or at odds with each other: Dionysius asserts that God is other (*[alterum]* 1) in a sense comparable to our commonly saying “a friend is another I” (i.e., not on account of a separation but on account of an attachment) and (2) in relation to an “essence” (so to speak) of such a kind that it is all in all (as he says). And Plato did not intend anything else. (DNA 145,147 [101])

The reference is to the Seventh Letter, 342

For everything that exists there are three classes of objects through which knowledge about it must come; the knowledge itself is a fourth, and we must put as a fifth entity the actual object of knowledge which is the true reality. We have then, first, a name, second a description, third an image, and fourth a knowledge of the object. Take a particular case if you want to understand the meaning of what I have just said; then apply the theory to every object in the same way. There is something for instance called a circle, the name of which is the very word I have just uttered. In the second place there is a description of that which is composed of nouns and verbal expressions. For example the description of that which is named round and circumference and circle would run as follows: the thing which has everywhere equal distances between its extremities and its center In the third place is the class of objects which is drawn and erased and turned on a lathe and destroyed, processes which do not affect the real circle. In the fourth place there are knowledge and understanding and correct opinion concerning them, all of which we must set down as one thing more that is found not in sounds nor in shapes of bodies, but in

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minds... Of all these four understanding approaches nearest in affinity and likeness to the fifth entity, while the others are more remote from it.¹¹¹

In our search for the essential, the particular gets in the way. The instability of names and our focus on things both conspire to obscure the essence.

Cusanus distinguishes two kinds of definition, one circumscriptive, the other constitutive. With the last consideration Cusanus returns to the already cited passage from Dionysius.

The abbot expresses his agreement:

ABBOT: I certainly see that this definition which you assert to be the only true and quidditative definition is not the one which Plato calls incomplete and defective. [Rep. IV, 505a, Meno 71e-79c] And when I give the matter more thought, I am greatly amazed at how the more known, the more clear, and the more easy this mode [of seeing] is, the more free it is from all dimness and uncertainty. Therefore, since no one can doubt that these definitions of yours are so true that they cannot be truer, the quiddity of things truly shines forth in them. But what will you say with respect to the Gospel, where we read that John the Baptist (than whom no one among those born of women is greater) [Matth 11: 11] asserts that no one has ever seen God and that the Son of God, who in the same Gospel is called Truth, has revealed this [fact]? (DNA 147 [102])¹¹²

Cusanus is obviously satisfied with the formulation he has found. We should note here the expression *rerum quidditas*.

NICHOLAS: I say the very same thing, viz., that God is invisible to every mode of seeing. Even if someone asserted that he had seen Him, surely he would not be able to express what he had seen. For in what sense is He (who is prior to the visible and the invisible) visible except in the sense that He excels everything visible, which apart from Him is (seen to be) nothing? Hence, when I see that He is neither the sky nor other than the sky and is not at all either other or other than any other, I do not see Him as if I knew what I saw. For the seeing which I direct toward God is not a visible seeing but is a seeing of the invisible in the visible. For example, when I see it to be true that no one has

¹¹¹ Translation L. A. Post

¹¹² Cf. John 14: 5-7: Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him."

John 1: 18: No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known. Cf. Matth, 11: 27-28.

seen God, then I see God, above everything visible, as not other than everything visible. But that actual Infinity which exceeds all sight and which is the Quiddity of all quiddities I do not at all see as visible—since what is visible, or is an object, is other than the power [of sight], whereas God, who cannot be other than anything, transcends every object. (DNA 147, 149 [103])

The passages remind us of the extent to which Cusanus' reading of Plato is through the lens of the *Gospel According to John*.

2

Let me return to the beginning of Plato's second letter, so important to Proclus and Cusanus.

It is like this. It is in relation to the king of all and on his account that everything exists, and that fact is the cause of all that is beautiful.

How are we to understand this passage? Cusanus understands the king here as another way of saying what he tries to capture with his expression *non aliud*. But what sense might he make of the second part of the Plato quotation, the fact that "it is in relation to the king of all and on his account that everything exists" is said to be the "cause of all that is beautiful"? Cause here should not be understood as efficient cause. The suggestion is rather that whenever we experience something as grounded in the king of all we experience it as beautiful. Beauty appears here as a transcendental. Everything is beautiful. To experience it as beautiful it to experience the gift of its being.

To say that beauty appears here as a transcendental suggests that it deserves to be placed with the traditional three transcendentals. This is a point discussed at some length by Jacques Maritain in *Art and Scholasticism*. What is a transcendental? Does beauty deserve to be included among them? Let me give you here Maritain's explanation:

Transcendentals are

concepts which surpass all limits of kind of category and will not suffer themselves to be confined in any class, because they absorb everything and are to be found everywhere. Like the one, the true and the good, it [beauty] is being itself considered from a certain aspect, it is a property of being: it is not an accident super-added to being, it adds to being

merely a relation of reason, it is being considered as delighting, by the mere intuition of it, an intellectual nature.¹¹³

Let us briefly consider the other transcendentals: *unum*, *verum*, and *bonum*. The first poses no problem. The very word *ens* suggests that a thing can be thought only as this one thing which it is. To be a thing, according to Ariatotle is not be divided in itself and to be divided from everything else. The second transcendental *verum*, suggest that being means openness or presence to intelligence. Think once more of the definition of truth as *adaequatio rei et intellectus*. A Christian might thus link the first transcendental, *unum*, to God the Father, identified by Augustine with the One of Plotinus, who created all things, the second transcendental, *verum*, to the Word, identified by Augustine with the Nous or Intellect of Plotinus, the Logos of the New Testament, i. e. the Son. Consider *Confessions* Book VII, ch. 19, n. 18.

And therein I read, not indeed in the same words, but to the selfsame effect, enforced by many and diverse reasons, that: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made by Him; and without Him was not anything made that was made.¹¹⁴

What then of the third transcendental, *bonum*? The *ens* here is thought in relation to appetite or desire. Did not God create the world and judge it to be good?

What the does it mean to call beauty a transcendental? Once more let me quote Maritain:

If beauty delights the mind, it is because beauty is essentially a certain excellence or perfection in the proportion of things to the mind. Hence the three conditions assigned to it by St. Thomas: integrity, because mind likes being, proportion because the mind likes order and likes unity; lastly and above all brightness or clarity, because the mind likes light and intelligibility. A certain splendor is indeed according to all the Ancients the essential character of beauty, — *claritas est de ratione pulchritudinis* [St. Thomas, Comment. In lib. *De divin. Nomin*, lect 6], *lux pulchrificat, quia sine luce omnia sunt turpia* [St. Thomas, Comment. In Psalm. Ps. Xxv, 5], — but it is a splendor of intelligibility; *splendor veri*, said St. Augustine, adding that “unity is the form of all beauty” [*De Vera Religione*, cap. 41]; *splendor formae*, said St. Thomas, with a metaphysician’s precision of language: for *form*, that is to say the principle determining

¹¹³ Jacques Maritain, *Art and scolasticism* trans. J. F. Scanlan (New Tyork: Scribner’s, 1954), p. 24.

¹¹⁴ Etienne Gildson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale, 1941), p. 48.

the peculiar perfection of everything which is, constituting and completing things in their essence and their qualities, the ontological secret so to speak, of their innermost being, their spiritual essence, their operative mystery, is above all the peculiar principle of intelligibility, the peculiar *clarity* of every thing. Every form, moreover, is a remnant or ray of the creative Mind impressed upon the heart of the being created. All, order and proportion, on the other hand, are the work of the mind. So, to say with the Schoolmen, that beauty is the *splendor of form shining on the proportioned parts of matter* [*Opusc. De Pulchro et Bono*, attributed to Albertus Magnus and sometimes to St. Thomas] is to say that it is a lightning of mind on a matter intelligently arranged. The mind rejoices in the beautiful because in the beautiful it finds itself again: recognizes itself, and comes into contact with its very own light. This is so true that they especially perceive and particularly relish the beauty of things who, like St. Francis of Assisi, for example, know that they emanate from a mind and refer them to their Author.¹¹⁵

In his thinking about the beautiful, Cusanus, as I shall try to show, moves very much within that orbit.

3

In his *Idiota de Mente* Cusanus has his layman offer the philosopher the example of a spoon to help the latter to a better understanding of the nature of mind.¹¹⁶ Hollowing out the wood the layman shapes it, until finally the form of spoon-ness shines forth fittingly, *convenienter resplendet*, that same form that in varying degrees shines forth (*reluet*) 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 1456¹¹⁷ Cusanus, invoking the

¹¹⁵ Ibid., mp. 20.

¹¹⁶ Nicolaus Cusanus, *Idiota de Mente*: trans. "The Layman on Mind," Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge* (Minneapolis: Banning, 1959), p. 179.

¹¹⁷ 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

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). *Proportio* 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 likened 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. Consider *Phaedrus*, 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.¹¹⁸

Ever since Plato's 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

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).

¹¹⁸ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250d, trans. R. Hackforth..

conveys to the light which is in the eye what is visible regarding the stone (DNA 79 [81]).

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 have everything from the substance, since they are its accidents — i. e. the shadow, the image of the substantial light. (DNA 81 [42])

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.

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.”¹¹⁹ The beauty of the human body is an example of substantial beauty. As we read in *De ludo globi*: “the whole shines forth [*reluceat*] 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

¹¹⁹ Nicholas de Cusa, *De ludo globi, The Game of Spheres*, trans. and intro. Pauline Moffit Watts (New York: Abaris, 1986), pp. 66 and 67. Translation modified. See also Santinello, p. 272, nn. 14, 15.

body; but the entire perfection of the human being shines forth more perfectly in the head.”¹²⁰ 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 forth [*reluce*t] in the preciousness” of his column, which his will defined and delimited, God’s power shines forth in the well ordered universe (DNA 71 [34]) and in everyone of its parts, most perfectly, according to Cusanus, in the human being, for him, too, 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.”¹²¹ 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).¹²² Such beauty calls the bride, the 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. 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, also of responsible thinking.

4

Let me conclude with a more personal remark. Only after returning to this material last year, did I discover that with this train of thought I had been unpacking something I had written in my dissertation (pp. 153-154) more than forty 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

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75. Translation modified.

¹²¹ *De Docta Ignorantia*, III, 3. p. 131.

¹²² Not altogether unrelated is Kant’s claim that the human being alone can furnish an ideal of beauty. Cf. *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, A55-56.

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.’¹²³
To touch reality in that way is to touch the truth.

¹²³ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophie*, 3 vols. (Berlin: Springer, 1932), vol. 3, p. 9.

12. The Incarnation

1

Let me return to Cusanus' defense of Protagoras against Aristotle's critique. To be sure, as Aristotle himself recognized, there is a sense in which knowledge and perception can 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? How are we to understand the Protagorean dictum?

Let me recapitulate: According to Cusanus we find the most fundamental measure within ourselves, where Cusanus is thinking first of all, not of the body, but of the mind itself. Plato, as I pointed out, already had understood thought as a process seeking 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; and that unity draws it. This lived tension of the one and the many demands resolution. The human being thus seeks to discover unity in the manifold; the manifold must be brought under a unity. But unity cannot simply be imposed, just as the measures we use must be created by us in response to what we experience.

But how is this to be thought? Our discussion of beauty offered a first answer: consider once more the Thomistic definition of beauty as *splendor formae*. A logos that transcends the mind calls it in the beautiful. Augustine thus defined the beautiful as *splendor veri*. Cusanus appropriates this understanding.

Some things are experienced by us as more beautiful than others, as Cusanus recognizes. Why this should be so is inexplicable. But this distinction between the less and the more beautiful inevitably lets us think of what is most beautiful. Like Kant, Cusanus too is led by his understanding of beauty to think of an ideal of beauty. The sermon *Tota pulchra es, amica mea* concludes thus by calling Christ, the bridegroom of the *Song of Songs*, *pulchritudo absoluta* (58, 11).¹²⁴ Such beauty calls the bride, the soul,

¹²⁴ This understanding of Christ as the ideal of beauty, familiar to medieval thought, is not altogether unrelated to Kant's claim that the human being alone can furnish an ideal of beauty. Cf. *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, A55-56.

with the most beautiful word, *amica*, beloved. Our soul experiences something of this call, the call of the divine logos, in all that is beautiful.

2

The incarnation, the descent of God into the world of things, the incarnation of the Word in a particular entity, is a necessity if God is to function as the measure of man. With this I return to *On Learned Ignorance*, to its Third Book, which develops the Christology of Cusanus. Philosophers have given it scant attention. In his abbreviated edition of *On Learned Ignorance* Hans Blumenberg thus omits it altogether. And that decision is easy to understand. These chapters are too readily understood as an attempt to make what Cusanus has to think 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* 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 given us his son, who died on the cross so that we might be saved. 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. Drawing on Cusanus, Bruno thus places us on the threshold of a Nietzschean nihilism.

Bruno, to be sure, was himself 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 as easily as Blumenberg and long before him Bruno were able to do. The death of God only gave special weight to the question: what is now to bind freedom? Does reason hold the answer? Cusanus finds his answer in faith, quite aware that such faith has to accept what to reason must appear folly, faith in the

incarnation of the infinite Gold in a human being, a mortal finite entity being. That is the mystery of Christmas. But for Cusanus that mystery has its foundation in God's love. Human love must answer God's love if our life is to gain meaning and measure. As I said, to reason all his must appear folly, but the task of reflection, according to Cusanus, is to make us learned about our ignorance, where he too invokes Socrates as a predecessor. Such learning makes room for faith.

3

The concept of Jesus, which Cusanus proposes to put forth in this Third Book is easy enough to grasp, if impossible to comprehend, in that it surpasses the reach of our reason: Jesus is said to be both **Absolute maximum** and **contracted maximum**. The first chapter of that book begins by recalling the preceding discussion:

Book One shows that the one absolutely Maximum—which is in-communicable, unintermixable, 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)

Not surprising is Cusanus' insistence that within a given species there is no absolute maximum or minimum. Think of red. There is no last shade of red before it trails off into orange or violet. And we can generalize:

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)

Important is the assertion of **continuity**.

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)

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 intellectual part deserved to be honored above the 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).

We are not in possession of an absolute measure that would allow us to declare any human being as absolutely superior to any other. We are caught up in our own language-games, judge by the measures these provide. There is no world-wide common sense. Cusanus considers this absence of an absolute measure of excellence here a divine gift contributing to peace in that it makes us more willing to leave these others alone, benighted though we might consider them.

But how does this perspectivism fit in with his Christianity?

Chapter Two, **The maximum contracted [to a species] is also the Absolute [Maximum; it is both] Creator and creature** addresses the question: what if there were, despite all that has been said, some individual which would also be the maximum of its species? Such an individual would be the incarnation of the ideal. The question that we must feel tempted to raise is, why engage in such thought experiments? Do they not run counter to the sentiments just expressed, lead to crusades and the like? And do they even make sense? Can we imagine an ideal rose? In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant would have us question this (A 55): an ideal of beauty can, according to him, only be thought with respect to the human being. Kant understands this ideal as the visible expression of the moral ideas that as beings of reason we bear within us. Important here is the idea of a **measure**: such an ideal of beauty would provide human beings with a measure. But can we make sense of such an ideal?

It is thoroughly clear that the universe is only contractedly-many-things; these are actually such that no one of them attains to the un-qualifiedly 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. (128-129)

Every line participates in the essence of line. In this respect there is to difference between lines. In this sense Cusanus can say that the maximum line “admits of no opposition.” But we can of course not imagine such a line, although we can in some fashion think it. That Cusanus can claim that such a maximum would have to be both God and creature is thus not surprising. But does the thought of the incarnated maximum make any sense?

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)

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). ... For such a [being] would have to be conceived by us as (1) in such a way God that it is also a creature, (2) in such a 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)

We might conclude that it would be vain to attempt to go any further. But Cusanus goes on to ask: of what nature would such a twofold maximum be. The answer given by the

tile of Chapter Three is expected: **Only in the case of the nature of humanity can there be such a maximum [individual]**. As already suggested, this answer should be compared with Kant's argument that only the human being permits of an ideal.

Cusanus here appeals to the distinction between **higher and lower**. We may want to ask whether this distinction has not been called into question by Cusanus' insistence on the lack of proportion between the finite and the infinite, creature and God. But clear is that the argument of part 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 then asserts that such a being must occupy the middle position in the hierarchy of creatures, must join the material; and the spiritual.

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)

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)

Nor could a spiritual being much above us:

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)

The only plausible candidate is the human being precisely because it is a **microcosm**. It is possible to speak of Cusanus' **anthropocentrism**, where we should note that geocentrism and anthropocentrism do not here go together. Nor do they go together in Copernicus or in the new science. So thought the ideal would provides all creation with a measure.

Cusanus has thus prepared the 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)

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, after many cycles (*revolutionibus*) had passed. (133)

Not surprisingly Cusanus goes on to identify this maximum with Jesus, the divine logos become flesh. And so the title of Chapter Four reads: **Blessed Jesus, who is God and man, is the [contracted maximum individual].**

Cusanus reminds us that faith guided these considerations. Indeed faith now takes over.

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 plenitudo*) 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. Being powerful over all things. (133)

How are we to understand “**the fullness of time**”? Is time like a waterglass that can be filled? It is another conception that resists comprehension. A higher reality here manifests itself in the world so that a special time and a special place are established. Not just this earth, but the universe gains something like a center. What establishes that center is faith.

Important is the statement that in **Him humanity was united to the Word of God**. The **Word** is the creative logos. Having its measure in Christ, the maximum of the human species, nature by the same stroke is established as essentially knowable by us. Our understanding of nature thus stands in a relationship to nature that is analogous to that of the inscribed polygon to the circle. Note how the problem of **knowledge** intertwines here with the problem of the **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)

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, 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)

Jesus thus provides us also with the ideal of beauty. There is no obvious Scriptural support for such an idealization. But the thought is familiar to the Middle Ages and there is an affinity with Renaissance humanism—think of Alberti, Leonardo or Michelangelo. The human body with its proportions provides the visual arts with its measure.

2

If reason has difficulty coping with the incarnation of the Word in Christ, such difficulty is compounded by the mystery of his birth. Cusanus turns to this mystery in **Chapter Five: Christ, conceived though the Holy Spirit, was born of the Virgin Mary.** The title already suggests the cardinal's 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, the doctrine was not really challenged before the Enlightenment, where 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, At issue is the triumph of life over death, of light over dark, the need to mediate between the divine and the human which in the *Symposium* Plato assigns to love. The Holy Spirit has the same function.

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)

Important here is the principle that like is generated from like. As a mortal 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 the Divine Word descends in the visible, as it did when God gave Moses his law. Christ represents the gift of the ideal, which according to Kant is the work of the imagination. One might want to look in this connection at recurrent iconoclastic controversies, which insisted on the inability of images to do justice to the divine essence. The answer has often been an appeal to the incarnation. If the divinity itself assumed sensible shape, why criticize the artist?

This gift of the ideal has its origin in love.

But every operation proceeds from a spirit and a love which unite 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)

The ground of this gift of the ideal 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)

The dogma of the immaculate conception of the Virgin was pronounced only in 1854. As this passage shows, what the dogma asserts is much older. Again it is interesting to ask: just what is at stake?

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)

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 do you 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, 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 a center surpasses reason.

3

Christianity is the religion of the dead God. How are we to understand this? **Chapter Six: The Mystery of the death of Jesus Christ** addresses that mystery. Once again Cusanus' intent to reconcile his account with established doctrine is evident. 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)

The understanding of human being that we are presented with here is broadly Platonic or Aristotelian. There is a supra-individual intellect, free of time and the world. Reason joins intellect to the sensible and temporal.

The animal is governed by two drives: concupiscence and anger. 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. 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)

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. 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)

Reason can call us to live a good life, but by itself it is not able to overcome that lack which is bound up with our mortality. 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.

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)

Such faith would seem to require a power over oneself that cannot be willed, that can only be acquired through grace.

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)

How then are we to understand the necessity of Christ's death? Chapter Seven addresses the **The Mystery of the Resurrection**. Why must death, this ultimate negativity be made part of the ideal?

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 his 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)

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)

Chapter Eight: Christ, the Firstfruits of those who sleep, ascended to Heaven

continues the account. 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 as mediator and savior, as God and man, as the way, the truth, and the life 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)

Cusanus owned the Koran in a Latin translation by Robert of Ketton (Robertus Ketenensis).

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)

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 has 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 Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's analogy between the universe and a successful poem.¹²⁵ God could be said to be 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.

¹²⁵ 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), p. 63.

13. Some Concluding Observations

1

In our very first session I pointed out that I understand Alberti's *On Painting* as a work that helped inaugurate what Heidegger came to call "The Age of the World Picture." Picture, I said, is understood here as a representation produced by the subject, something that has its center in and receives its measure from that subject. In Cusanus' writings something similar suggests itself in what we can call the Protagorean theme of his thinking. But a picture, so understood, has no place for transcendence.

Cusanus to be sure was concerned to open us to transcendence. That was the point of his doctrine of learned ignorance. But if Cusanus' primary concern was to lead us to a better understanding of God, there is also another side: Cusanus, too, was very much interested in this sensible world, in Alberti's *la piu grassa Minerva*, as the little dialogue *Idiota de staticis experimentis* shows. The mathematical method Cusanus advocates there for the investigation of nature invites comparison with the mathematical method Alberti advocates for the representation of nature, although as we saw, there is an all important difference: Cusanus remains very much aware that such a mathematical representation subjects reality to a human measure that in principle cannot do justice to reality as it is.

Heidegger was of course not thinking of Alberti. Nor was he thinking of Cusanus. Alberti to the best of my knowledge is never mentioned by him; nor is Cusanus mentioned in the many volumes of the *Gesamtausgabe*. In the case of Alberti this is not surprising. Heidegger has surprisingly little interest in the Renaissance, a philosophical defect, as his student Ernesto Grassi complained.¹²⁶ Nor did he spend much time on the history of art. That he does not mention Cusanus is rather more surprising, given a number of themes in Cusanus that resonate with Heidegger's thought; given especially the many kind words Heidegger has for Meister Eckhart, in whom Cusanus recognized a precursor. I wonder whether there is another thinker to whom Heidegger has given an

¹²⁶ See Karsten Harries, "The Antinomy of Being: Heidegger's Critique of Humanism," *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, ed. Steven Crowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.178-198

equally positive reception. The lack of mention of Cusanus is surprising also given the fact that in his first semester at the university of Freiburg, the winter semester 1909/1910, Heidegger enrolled in two courses by Johann Übinger, his *Logik* and his *Philosophisches Seminar*, following this up in the following semester with Übinger's *Metaphysik*.¹²⁷ It is to Übinger that we owe the first comprehensive study of Cusanus: *Die Gotteslehre des Nikolaus Cusanus*.¹²⁸ And it was Übinger who rediscovered and published in that book the tetralogue *De li non aliud*, a text that invites comparison with Heidegger's *Identität und Differenz*, Übinger's courses were the only philosophy courses in which Heidegger enrolled that first year. I find it difficult to imagine that Übinger did not mention Cusanus in at least one of these courses. But the fact that after this first year Heidegger turned to mathematics and science may suggest that he did not find what Übinger had to teach to his liking. But all that calls for more careful consideration.

Be this as it may, in "The Age of the World Picture" Heidegger associates the origin of that world picture with Descartes and his promise of a method that would render us humans the masters and possessors of nature. I tried to show that in important ways Alberti's perspective construction is a precursor of Cartesian method. And so is the mathematical method Cusanus advocates in *De staticis experimentis*. In this seminar I took a look at Alberti and Cusanus to cast some light, not so much on Heidegger's "Age of the World Picture," as on the way the power that the mathematization of nature has granted us is purchased at the price of a loss of transcendence.

2

In this concluding seminar let me return once more to the passage from Husserl's *The Crisis of European Sciences* I read you already in our first session. Here Galileo is blamed for replacing the life-world, the world in which we live and perceive, care and fear, with the world constructed by science. Crucial here is Galileo's appropriation of Plato, an appropriation that invites comparison with that by Cusanus, where Cusanus' and Galileo's very different understanding of the power of mathematics is key:

¹²⁷ "Martin Heidegger as Student," compiled by Dr. Alfred Denker.

<http://www.freewebs.com/m3smg2/HeideggerStudent.html>

¹²⁸ Johann Übinger, *Die Gotteslehre ds Nikolaus Cusanus* (Münster und Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1988)

For Platonism the real had a more or less perfect methexis in the ideal. This afforded ancient geometry possibilities of a primitive application to reality. [But] through Galileo's mathematization of nature, nature is idealized under the guidance of the new mathematics; nature itself becomes — to express it in a modern way — a mathematical manifold.¹²⁹

Platonism thus presupposes a distance between the real and the ideal. The resistance of the former to the embrace of the later is constitutive of nature. But such resistance is ruled out by the Christian understanding of an omnipotent creator who is the author of both matter and form. The Christian Platonism of Galileo and Descartes thus takes mathematics to be constitutive of nature. Cusanus, because he understands mathematics first of all as an unfolding of the human mind, would have called this claim into question. To be sure, he too sees reason to speak of a divine mathematics, but that must be understood as an unfolding of the divine mind and as such it remains hidden from us. Cusanus thus could not have endorsed what Cassirer called the Christian Platonism that is a presupposition of the new science.¹³⁰ Koyré is right to insist that Cusanus refuses to the “panarchy of mathematics.”¹³¹ Galileo, however, does not distinguish between a human and a divine mathematics. The world revealed by science thus comes to be understood as the world. Today the still progressing mathematization of nature that Galileo helped inaugurate continues to shape our life-world, where Galileo was of course very much aware of the distance that separates the world known to science from the world revealed to us by everyday experience.

As we saw, the loss of meaning that Husserl deplures in the *Crisis* is also recognized by Heidegger as a consequence of the reduction of the world in which we first of all find ourselves to the modern “World Picture.” As we saw, the word “picture” points to what gets lost in this reduction. To the extent that we understand the world as a

¹²⁹ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology. An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. and intro. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 23.

¹³⁰ Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in the Renaissance*, trans. and intro. Mario Domandi (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1964). pp. 168-169. See also Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisprobleme in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit*, 4 vols. (Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), vol. 1, pp. 389-390.

¹³¹ Alexander Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1958), p. 19.

picture, we stand before it, can observe it, but have lost our place in it. A picture assumes an eye placed before and thus outside it. The Cartesian world-picture assumes an I placed before and thus outside it. So understood persons have no place in the scientific world-picture. But this suggests that the scientific world picture has to lose sight of what most profoundly matters. Persons are very much part of everyday experience.

3

What is experience? Do we do justice to it, when we use the relation between subject and object as a guiding thread? Does the third-person perspective of the detached observer give us adequate access to reality?

Heidegger recasts this question as the question: what is a thing? Is it “a thing” to be understood as something present-at-hand? *Being and Time* calls this answer into question. The being “in itself” (“an sich”) of things is there determined as readiness-to-hand, inviting a pragmatic reading of Heidegger’s fundamental ontology. By putting the “in itself” into quotation marks, he both lets us think of the Kantian thing-in-itself, even as he invites us to question his appropriation of Kant’s terminology. The Kantian expression is indeed used to suggest that readiness-to-hand is not to be understood subjectively, “as merely a way of taking them,” *als bloßer Auffassungscharakter*.¹³² First of all and most of the time we encounter things as ready to hand. But in a later marginal comment Heidegger expresses a reservation: *aber doch nur Begegnischarakter*, “but nevertheless only a way of encountering them.” And already in *Being and Time* he points out that “only by reason of something present-at-hand ‘is there ‘ anything ready to hand’”, only to follow this with the question: does it follow, however, granting this thesis for the nonce, that readiness-to hand is ontologically founded upon presence-at-hand?”¹³³ This rhetorical question demands a negative answer, but this does not mean that the being of the thing is adequately understood as readiness-to-hand. Cusanus attempted to gesture towards this being with this concept of the *non aliud*.

¹³² Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*. 7th ed. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1953), p. 72; *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 270. p. 101.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

In “The Origin of the Work of Art” Heidegger turns to the work of art to gain a deeper understanding of the being of the thing, a turn that invites the question: how does it compare with Cusanus’ thinking of the *non aliud*? Do these two attempts to think the being of the thing point in the same general direction? That may seem farfetched. More immediately suggestive is the question: how does Heidegger’s turn compare with Kant’s turn to the aesthetic in the *Critique of Judgment*, which also would seem to represent a deepening of Kant’s concept of experience and that means also of the thing. That turn invites the question: how is experience, thus expanded, possible?

Compared to an the analysis provided in *Being and Time*, what is new in “The Origin of the Work of Art” is Heidegger’s insistence that the being of equipment is understood properly only when we understand it as a belonging to the earth, where the earth is understood by Heidegger as what

shows itself only when it remains undisclosed and unexplained. Earth thus shatters every attempt to penetrate into it. It causes every merely calculating importunity upon it to turn into a destruction. This destruction may herald itself under the appearance of mastery and of progress in the form of technical-scientific objectification of nature, but this mastery remains an impotence of will. The earth appears openly cleared as itself only when it is perceived and preserved as that which is by nature undisclosable, that which shrinks from every disclosure and constantly keeps itself closed up.¹³⁴

"Earth" names here what I want to call "material transcendence." When one uses the word “transcendence” one should be clear concerning just what is being transcended. In this case what is being transcended is the reach of our concepts or words. In this sense Cusanus’ *non aliud* transcends the reach of the *ratio*. To speak of material transcendence is to suggest that some thing, say a rose, can be experienced in such a way that it transcends the reach of language and reason. Cusanus might invoke here the *non aliud*. What is transcended is every linguistic or conceptual space. Transcended also is what Heidegger calls the "world," which names a space of intelligibility in which things must take their place if they are to be disclosed and explained. But even if constituted by our language or concepts and as such appearances, the things that thus appear are not created

¹³⁴ Martin Heidegger, “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes,” *Holzwege*, (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1977), p. 36; “The Origin of the Work of Art,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and intro. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 47.

by us, but given. Inseparable from our experience of the thingness of things is a sense of this gift, a recognition of the fact that the rift between thing and word, between earth and world cannot be closed or eliminated.

Continued reflection of what is presupposed by our experience of what makes a thing a thing pushed Heidegger still further, pushed him to a point where transcendental reflection invites a turn to what we may want to call the mystical. In this connection Heidegger introduced the fourfold, the *Geviert* that is said to be co-present in the presencing of things. If the *Geviert* is indeed constitutive of things, it would seem that transcendental reflection should open up an easy path to it. What makes this path not so easy, Heidegger insists, is the fact that the ruling thing awareness blocks adequate access to the things. Heidegger is aware of the untimeliness of his speaking of the “united four,” of earth and sky or heaven (*Himmel* can mean either), of the divine ones, *die Göttlichen*, and mortals. Such talk may be understood as the nostalgic accompaniment of his understanding of the modern age, shaped as it is by science and technology and thus by metaphysics, as the age of the *Weltbild*, the world picture or the *Gestell*, both terms that meant to characterize the covering up of a more fundamental awareness of things.

That our age will stumble over Heidegger’s understanding of the *Geviert* and the associated understanding of the thing is only to be expected.

Three of the terms are easy to understand.

1. Earth names first of all the ground that supports us. But it also names what I have called “material transcendence,” the thingness of things that will always elude out conceptual nets.

2. Heidegger’s *Himmel* is also familiar. It means first of all the ever changing sky above. But we should not forget that looking up to the sky we experience ourselves as not bound by the here and now. The word “spirit” points to the possibility of such self-transcendence. The word thus means not only the sky above, but also the spiritual, ecstatic dimension of our being, the space presupposed by every logical or linguistic space.

3. The least problematic term if the fourth. As *Being and Time* had already shown, our being is, in its very essence, that of mortals.

4. But what does Heidegger mean by *die Göttlichen*, the divine ones? How are we to think these? Heidegger here is thinking of Hölderlin, who speaks of gods, angels, the divine ones, and the Godhead. Especially important to Heidegger is Hölderlin's line "it is the Godhead with which man measures himself."¹³⁵ To exist authentically, Heidegger now seems to be saying, human beings must measure themselves by something divine. But how does such a repetition of the familiar understanding of the human being as *imago Dei*, to which Heidegger himself referred critically in *Being and Time*, agree with the concept of authenticity that he there developed? It would seem to leave no room for something divine that provides human being with a measure.

Once again following Hölderlin, Heidegger speaks not only of the Godhead, but of gods. Thus we read in "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry": "Human Dasein is brought in a firm relation and placed on a ground when the gods are named primordially and the essence of things is allowed to speak so that only now things shine forth."¹³⁶ This claims that language is a necessary condition of the presencing of things. But further it claims that language presupposes a primordial naming of the gods. How are we to understand this?

A successful naming of the essence of things presupposes, as I have suggested before, that these must already have touched human beings in some fashion. To find the right word, to take the proper measure, we have to experience how things belong together. Some manifold seems gathered into a whole by some presiding theme. Think of perceiving a family resemblance. We can perceive such a resemblance without being in possession of the concept that would explain it. To name a god is to find a word for the ground of such a belonging-together of things. Hölderlin's and Heidegger's gods thus recall Plato's ideas. And Cusanus, as we saw, recognizes in his *non aliud* their counterpart.

According to Plato we remember these ideas. Baumgarten might have spoken of a clear, but confused perception of perfection; Kant of an aesthetic judgment. Cusanus might have spoken of beauty calling the soul. Heidegger speaks a different language: the

¹³⁵ Martin Heidegger, "... dichterisch wohnt der Mensch..." *Vorträge und Aufsätze, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 7, p. 200.

¹³⁶ Martin Heidegger, "Hölderlin und das Wesen der Dichtung," *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 4, p. 41.

gods themselves have to let us speak.¹³⁷ But the fundamental point should by now be familiar to us: our logos has to respond to a transcendent logos. As Heidegger says of the call of conscience in *Being and Time*, the call of this logos has to be a wordless call. Heidegger therefore calls “the divine ones” the beckoning messengers of the godhead.”¹³⁸ Once again, following Hölderlin, Heidegger will also speak of angels. The poet hears and responds to their message and make it public. Such ability to hear binds the poetic imagination. But every attempt to thus name the gods and to make public what remains incomprehensible in order to give human beings the measures they need to come together as a community does violence to what surpasses comprehension. Again and again we will replace gods with golden calves.

What is such talk of gods and angels to us today? Would we philosophers not have been better served, had Heidegger listened more to Kant than to Hölderlin? Are we not talking here about the productive imagination as the ground of all our concepts, where the German *Einbildungskraft* points to the gathering together of some manifold that Heidegger connects with the word *logos*? As Kant recognized, we cannot look for the ground of such gathering in either the subject or the object. It surpasses our understanding and it is therefore not surprising that we should grope for it with inadequate symbols.¹³⁹ Cusanus spoke of the *non aliud*. But what can be understood is that without this ground there can be no authentic Dasein.

As Heidegger makes clear in *Being and Time*, his talk of authenticity presupposes an ideal of human existing that can hardly be realized in our world. At bottom it is still the same ideal that the young Heidegger once understood as the “the free self-possession of the entire Dasein.” Once this ideal let him understand philosophy as the mortal enemy of the faith in which all theology has its ground. But the more resolute the attempt at such “free self-possession,” the more inescapable the recognition that such self-possession demands that freedom be bound by something like faith. In his “Dialogue with a Japanese” Heidegger calls the relation between the word of Scripture and theological-speculative thinking that occupied the young theology student the same

¹³⁷ *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 4, p. 45.

¹³⁸ *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 7, p. 151

¹³⁹ Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, "Einleitung" and pars. 49, 57, und 59.

relation that, then still concealed, was later to occupy him as the relation between language and Being.¹⁴⁰ The statement is a bit surprising. Did Heidegger not say in the *Introduction to Metaphysics* that a world separated the Christian conception of logos, which understood logos as a being, from the understanding that we meet with in a thinker such as Heraclitus, who understood Being as logos and logos again as “primordial gathering.”¹⁴¹ In the Old Testament logos means the word in the sense of commandment; the Ten Commandments were *hoi deka logoi*. “Logos thus means: the *keryx*, *angelos*, the herold, the messenger who transmits orders and commandments.”¹⁴² In his conversation with the Japanese Heidegger thus bridges this onto-theological difference. And when he there says of his theological origin that origin also awaits us as a task, he invites philosophy to return to onto-theology. Our task is to make a transition from Being understood as *logos*, as gathering, to some concrete being that we experience and that gathers us. The logos must be incarnated in matter. The divine word must become flesh. To Cusanus it seemed natural to think this problem as the problem of incarnation.

Still concealed, the relationship between the word of Scripture and theological-speculative thinking is said by Heidegger to have been the same relationship as that between language and Being.¹⁴³ In a different and yet similar way it also concealed the relationship between the divine and the human logos. Both Being and language Heidegger thinks again and again as logos, understood as “the constant gathering” of beings.¹⁴⁴ And when we read in *Being and Time* “Discourse is existentially language,” and that means is essentially incarnated in word-things, i.e. beings, “because that entity whose disclosedness it articulates according to significations, has, as its kind of Being Being-in-the-world — a Being which has been thrown and submitted to the ‘world,’¹⁴⁵ the same argument can be used to support the following: the divine Heraclitean logos must descend into the realm of beings, has to become concrete and visible. The logos has to become flesh. Philosophy cannot comprehend such incarnation. Nor can it force such

¹⁴⁰ *Unterwegs zur Sprache, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 12, p. 91

¹⁴¹ *Einführung in die Metaphysik, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 40, pp.143, 141

¹⁴² *Gesamtausgabe*, vol.40, p. 143

¹⁴³ *Gesamtausgabe*, vol 12, p. 91

¹⁴⁴ *Gesamtausgabe*, vol.40, p. 139

¹⁴⁵ *Being and Time*, p. 204.

a descent. But it can show that such a descent is demanded by Heidegger's concept of authenticity.

Authenticity demands windows in the house objectifying reason has built, windows to transcendence. How is such transcendence experienced? One such experience is the experience of the beautiful. Another is the experience of a person. For Cusanus it is an experience of the *non aliud*,