The Finite and the Infinite

The Humanistic Mysticism of Nicholas of Cusa

Andrew Weeks

A century after Seuse and Tauler, Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) appears to project the inwardness of the medieval monk's cell outward by envisaging the boundlessness of divine being and the universe. Eckhart was an important influence on the Cusan approach to the problems of time and eternity and the one and the many.[1] However, the new speculation was of a strikingly distinct cast.

Cusanus deemphasized the Eckhartian themes of the inner being or of the spark or birth of the Son in the soul and instead developed a new form of mystical speculation involving number and measure—criteria the mind uses in researching the external world. The infinitude which is beyond all measure leaves us in a condition of incomprehension between the infinitely great and the infinitely small. There is no proportion of the infinite to the finite. By the standard of perfect exactitude, any human judgment is reduced to imprecision and error, so that by its own devices human knowledge is predestined to failure. However, all irreconcilables are conjoined and reconciled for Cusanus in the paradoxical "coincidence of opposites." Peering through this central enigma of thought, the finite mind approaches the *deus absconditus* as the conceptual reconfiguration of Christ. The God who can only be adumbrated with speculative thought is revealed in Scripture and known to faith and mystical contemplation.

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[1] See Herbert Wackerzapp, *Der Einfluß Meister Eckharts auf die ersten philosophischen Schriften des Nikolaus von Kues (1440-1450)* (Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1962), esp. 105ff., 111ff., 116ff. (Eckhart's relevant points were based on our usual texts of Genesis and the Johannine Prolog. Even the geometrical symbolism of Nicholas is encountered in these Latin treatises of Eckhart.)

Cusanus is open to a universe of the most grandiose measure. He entertains the concept of a "privatively" infinite universe—a world of which the mind can conceive of no boundary. The Cusan universe is an ensemble of relational constructs conceptually centered in God. During the Renaissance, the world of speculative mysticism increased in complexity. In the century after Cusanus conceived the outlines of his expansive universe, imaginative images of nature as microcosm and macrocosm were fleshed out in the more influential systems of Agrippa von Nettesheim, Paracelsus,[2] and Jacob Boehme.

As a rule, Cusanus is regarded and studied as a philosopher, and rightly so, since he was thoroughly steeped in philosophical and theological erudition. Nevertheless, there are also merits to studying him as a mystic. Many of his key terms are said to be used without clear definition. It is not clear what he means when he writes that the divine things and human things "coincide" in Christ; or when he contends that God is present in all things through the mediation of the universe; or that all things are in all other things.[3] If these ambiguities are reprehensible for a philosopher, they are less so for the mystic whose purpose is to show that all things visible to the eye or the mind are a single mystery, to be addressed not by human reason, but by embracing an even greater mystery. There is no sharp distinction between his philosophical and mystical writings. The seminal speculative work, *De Docta Ignorantia (On Learned Ignorance,* 1440), is entirely congruent with the mystical treatise, *De Visione Dei* (1453).

The infinite unity and the coincidence of opposites can be viewed as tokens of Cusanus's life and times. Nikolaus Krebs (or Chryffs) was born, the son of a boatsman, in Kues (Cusa) on the Mosel

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[2] It is certain that Nettesheim and probable that Paracelsus knew of Nicholas. See Kurt Goldammer, "Das Menschenbild des Paracelsus zwischen theologischer Tradition, Mythologie und Naturwissenschaft," in *Paracelsus in neuen Horizonten: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Vienna: Verband der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaften Österreichs, 1986), 219. But their kinship is an indirect one: the similarity of their conceptual apparatus may also derive from third sources.

[3] On philosophical difficulties, see Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance* (Minneapolis: Banning Press, 2nd edition 1985, 2nd printing 1990), 14, 24ff.; *Nicholas of Cusa's Debate with John Wenck* (Minneapolis: Banning Press, 1984), 7.

River, from which town his Latin name Cusanus is derived. He was sent to the school of the Brethren of the Common Life in Deventer and briefly attended the University of Heidelberg before continuing his studies at the University of Padua, graduating there in jurisprudence. In Padua, he encountered some of the best minds of his age and indulged his passion for all forms of knowledge. A man of universal interests, he undertook impressive courses of study in the areas of mathematics, astronomy, physics, medicine, classical literature, and the new Humanism. After graduating, he served the Church as a lawyer, assisting the work of the Council of Basel and entering upon a long career as a papal legate and bishop. In addition to the intellectual ferment of his time, its worldly crises and its need for political and ecclesiastic reform preoccupied him. The hopes of reform were set against new upheavals which were nothing less than earthshaking: the great armed heresy of the Hussites, the conflicts of the popes and the councils, and the impending demise of Constantinople under Turkish onslaught.

Each of the stages of his life confronted him with what was most forward-looking in his age. His schooling in Deventer under the tutelage of the Brethren of the Common Life brought him into the ambiance of a devout lay order that existed without vows. In quiet opposition to the decadence of monasticism, the Brethren practiced their devotion and enlightened service to humanity outside the religious orders. The *Devotio Moderna* valued both the inner life and the productive activity of the individual. The Brethren looked back to their mystical forbears, Gerard Grote (1340-1384) and the Rhenish mysticism of Jan van Ruysbroeck (1293-1381). The schools of the Brethren would later educate Erasmus and Calvin. During Nicholas's schooling in Deventer, he may have known Thomas à Kempis (1379/80-1471), under whose name *The Imitation of Christ* became one of the most famous devotional works of all time.

The quiet religiosity of the *Devotio Moderna* encouraged Nicholas in a monk-like devotion which in its simplicity appears to contrast with the daring of his intellectual enterprises. In Cusanus, liberal-

minded intellectuality and simple devotion were surprisingly compatible. In his work, this is reflected in his ideal of the layman who knows that the voice of wisdom is heard not only in the scholarly tomes—in which the learned are often misled by the "authority" of a written word—but also on public "streets and squares."[4] The Cusan ideal of the layman is that of the mind guided by common sense and open to common experience in the quest for truth.

Cusanus, the intellectual, the humanistic collector of all knowledge, ancient and modern, was spurred on by the scientific progress that had gained momentum during the fourteenth century. To name only one pertinent example, Nicholas Oresme had achieved successes in the field of dynamics and mathematics. Oresme had seriously entertained the hypothesis that the earth revolves around the sun. He had considered many of the counterarguments specious, though in the end he concluded that the argument in favor was insufficient. Copleston writes that Oresme had argued that "God is not only one and unique but also infinite," and that there is no reason why God could not have created a plurality of worlds.[5] Oresme also devised graphs for demonstrating variations in the intensity of motion, thereby depicting a movement in time as a figure in space. Whether or not stimulated by his direct influence, Cusanus was drawn by this same scientific and speculative current. Though not a scientist in a modern sense, his openness to daring theories and proofs by experience led him to speculate about standards of evidence. He wrote that physicians should keep records of the weights of urine or of medicinal herbs and obtain contrastive measurements of pulse rates for young and old and for the sick and the healthy.

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[4] See Nikolaus von Kues, *Idiota de sapientia,* in *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften* 3, ed. Leo Gabriel, trans. Dietlind und Wilhelm Dupré (Wien: Herder, 1964-1967), 422. *("Idiota": "Hoc est quod aiebam, scilicet te duci auctoritate et decipi. Scripsit aliquis verbum illud, cui credis. Ego autem tibi dico, quod sapientia foris clamat in plateis; et est clamor eius, quoniam ipsa habitat altissimis.")* Cf. in the same volume, *Idiota de mente* and *Idiota de staticis experimentis*.

[5] See Frederick Copleston, S. J., *The History of Philosophy* 3, part 1 (New York: Image Books, 1953), 172-76.

Cusanus took over an expanding and problem-filled picture of the world. Like Oresme, he saw all things as encompassed by the infinite. Space no longer possessed an absolute "up" or "down." Everything moved, including the earth. Measure and direction had always been a feature of the earth, rather like the proportions of a living organism. Direction and distance had pertained to the unique topography of a world qua individual. Medieval maps showed this world-individual with an inherent orientation in the radical sense of the word Orient: Jerusalem was situated at the top or at the center of the map. Due to mathematical researches and the increasing interest in geography and exploration, new charts were being devised in the fifteenth century, utilizing degree lines and showing newly discovered regions.

This revolution in measurement contributed to the tenor and symbolism of the Cusan thought. A cartographer in his own right, he once compared the mind to a mapmaker who sits in his chamber in order to receive messages from the senses and compile a map of the city outside. When the map has been completed, the mind as mapmaker dismisses the messengers of sense experience, shuts its doors, and revolves its scrutiny from the city to the activity of mapmaking—in order to obtain a mystical knowledge of God.[6] One can characterize the mysticism of Cusanus as a system of constructs, contrived so as to lead the spectator to the infinite unity of God. This unity was also to imply a greater degree of latitude for the individual in matters of faith.

Balancing unity with diversity is the political agenda behind Cusanus's work. In addition to a lifelong adherence to the pious practical individualism of the *Devotio Moderna* and to humanistic scholarship, his political involvements shaped his mysticism. If infinity, extension, and number call to mind the mathematical advances of the time, his theme of unity recalls the efforts of his age to shore up the disintegrating late medieval order. Cusanus actively participated in these efforts, devoting the

[6] Kues, *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften* 3, *Compendium* ch. 8, 707-11.

early work *De Concordantia Catholica* to the pursuit of harmony. At the beginning of his career in the Church, the Council of Constance healed the Great Schism of the Church, but at the same council Jan Hus was burned, touching off one of the most violent rifts of medieval Christianity—a vivid reminder of the dissent and oppression that characterized Christendom as much as in the time of Hildegard or Eckhart. An outstanding figure of the late fourteenth century, Jean Gerson, was like Cusanus a mystic and a supporter of unity, active both against Hus and in favor of healing the schism and taking the *Devotio Moderna* into the fold. Cusanus became personally involved in the attempts to repair the division of the Eastern and Western churches in order to salvage Constantinople from the impending Ottoman conquest.

During his homeward voyage from Constantinople around the end of 1437 or the beginning of 1438, Cusanus was illuminated with the ideas for On Learned Ignorance. These came to him, as:

> 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.[7]

Compared to Hildegard's visions or Eckhart's divine knowing, this may sound like a mere rhetorical flourish. Yet there is no reason to assume that this assertion of divine inspiration is any less sincere—or less mystical by our definition—than any other assertion of a knowledge of divine truths from a divine source. This remark made by Cusanus in his dedicatory letter to his old friend Cardinal Julian

[7] Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance* (Minneapolis: Banning Press, 2nd edition 1985, 2nd printing 1990), 158. (Subsequent citations to *Docta Ignorantia* (DI) are referenced to the Hopkins translation by book, chapter, and section.)

is just as appropriately proportioned for asserting his authority as were the visionary reports of the nuns for establishing theirs.

Cusanus's seminal experience reflected a pivotal transition in European history. In route home from his historic attempt to reunite a long divided and now acutely threatened Christendom, the scholar and legate received from "the Father of Lights" his understanding of infinite unity and the coincidence of opposites. According to his recollection, the insight into learned ignorance had come to him as this wise unknowing itself. The theme of wise ignorance anticipates the humanistic spirit that is open to all human knowledge, but also aware of the limits of human knowledge. Cusanus can therefore rightly be considered a Humanistic mystic. The challenge to ecclesiastical authority and unity was acute in his period. The Cusan intellectual mysticism seems futile and dilettantish when it gives rise to the practical ecumenicism of *On the Peace of Faith (De Pace Fidei).* However, as a theoretical edifice, his work as a whole must be recognized as a spectacular endeavor to address the late medieval challenge to unity.

Many of Cusanus's propositions now appear patently specious. In order to approach him initially from an angle favorable to his thought, we would do well to consider that, from classical times to the present, it has been evident that when one reasons in terms of the infinite, paradoxes arise. Among the classical masters of paradox, Cusanus mentions Parmenides and Zeno.[8] Parmenides, Philo of Alexandria, and Plotinus offered precedents for the conception of God as the One, boundless or infinite. After Cusanus, we might think of Pascal's fearful visions of infinitude in the *Thoughts,* or of Leibniz, who will be discussed in a subsequent chapter, or, in modern times, of Georg Cantor's mathematics of transfinite numbers.

[8] See *De Principio (Der Ursprung),* in *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften* 2:245-7.

Saint Augustine also offered prototypes for the speculation of Cusanus. Augustine employed the idiom of an incomprehensible knowing or wise ignorance, *docta ignorantia.* According to the *City of God* (12:18), God, whose wisdom paradoxically transcends the simple and the multiple, incomprehensibly comprehends the infinite.[9] Other Augustinian reflections demonstrated that the human mind is incapable of proceeding by steps from the finite to the infinite or to the infinitesimal. The inconceivability of that which is infinitely great or small had been anticipated by Augustine in *On the Trinity:*

> For we do not conceive the greatness of bodies which we have never seen without the aid of memory.... And our reason in fact goes even further, but the phantasy does not follow; as when our reason proclaims the infinity of number which no vision in the thought of corporeal things has yet grasped. The same reason teaches us that even the tiniest bodies can be divided infinitely; but when we have finally arrived at the slightest and most minute particles which we have seen and still remember, we are no longer capable of gazing upon slighter and more minute phantasies....[10]

The senses see small or large objects. The imagination conceives of even smaller or larger ones. However, the senses and the imagination reach a point beyond which (in the overall system of Augustine) only the intellectual vision might penetrate. Already for Augustine, then, the

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[9] See Augustine, *De Civitate Dei,* 12:19, in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* (Turnholt: Brepols, 1955), 375—6. In idiom, Cusanus's letter to Julian seems to mimic the use of oxymoron and paradox in the work by Augustine *("[Deus) ... cuius sapientia simpliciter multiplex et uniformiter multiformis tam incomprehensibili comprehensione omnia inconprehensiblia conprehendit, ut, quaecumque nova et dissimilia consequentia praecedentibus si semper facere vellet, inordinata et inprovisa habere non posset, nec ea provideret ex proximo tempore, sed aeterna preaescientia contineret").* That Augustine made use of the term *docta ignorantia* is mentioned in Karl Jaspers, *Nikolaus Cusanus* (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1987), 23.

[10] Augustine, *The Trinity,* bk. 11 (St. Paul: Daughters of St. Paul, 1965), 213; *De Trinitate* 11:10, in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 50 (Turnholt: Brepols, 1968), 354-5. *(Nam neque ipsas magnitudines corporum quas numquam uidimus sine ope memoriae cogitamus. [Quantum enim spatii solet occupare per magnitudinem mundi noster obtutus, in tantum extendimus quaslibet corporum moles cum eas maximas cogitamus.] Et ratio quidem pergit in ampliora, sed phantasia non sequitur. Sequitur quippe cum infinitatem quoque numeri ratio renuntiet, quam nulla uisio corporalia cogitantis apprehendit. Eadem ratio docet minutissima etiam corpuscula infinite diuidi; cum tamen ad eas tenuitates uel minutias peruentum fuerit quas uisas meminimus, exiliores minutioresque phantasias iam non possumus intueri, quamuis ratio non desinat persequi ac diuidere. [Ita nulla corporalia nisi aut ea quae meminimus aut ex his quae meminimus cogitamus.])*

incommensurable relation of creature to Creator has its mathematical equivalent in the lack of proportion of the finite to the infinite. By the very nature of things and concepts, an unbridgeable chasm remains between the human and the divine power to conceive.

One of Cusanus's demonstrations of the coincidence of opposites proceeds to the conclusion that an infinite straight line contains the triangle, the circle, and all other geometrical figures. If his arguments appear riddled with medieval flukes, his intention was to demonstrate that the finite stands in no proportion to the infinite, even though the finite is measured by the infinite, indeed is, as he puts it, a "contraction" of the infinite. As the circle waxes larger, its curve approaches a straight line. Yet no succession of incrementations can ever flatten its curve. This is exemplary for the relationship of normal knowledge to mystical knowledge: to comprehend the being of God, the mind would have to become one with its object. Since the infinite is incommensurable with the finite, the mind can gain no positive knowledge of God. Since the intellect is not truth it can only approximate its object. The mind will always fall short, since the truth could be comprehended "infinitely more precisely." Cusanus writes that the mind is to truth as a polygon is to a circle in which it is inscribed. The more angles are added to the polygon, the more it resembles 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" (DI 1:3, 10).

Human uncertainty is therefore also a correlative of the infinite differences that constitute the plurality of the world. This plurality is embodied concretely in human individuality and in the diversity of things. Uncertainty and multiplicity thus allow for a latitude of opinion; they allow for a tolerance bounded by the one faith or by faith in the One. The uncertainty of all finite knowledge becomes wise, becomes *docta ignorantia,* by recognizing that not human reason but the intellectual vision approaches

through grace the higher truth of the world. The gateway to wise ignorance is the coincidence of opposites.

In order to understand the function of the coincidence of opposites in Cusanus's mysticism, it is necessary to recall the role of medieval analogy. Cusanus retains the medieval notion that the created being of things is full of natural analogies which refer us to the divine being. For Hildegard, the ensembles of visible nature pointed to the eternal truths of God. For Eckhart, the denial of images resulted in an increased reliance on paradoxes—of the inner and outer, of being and nothing. Cusanus equates the visible with the conceivable. Among all things perceptible to our minds, none are more perfect than numbers. All comparison intrinsically presupposes number: "Perhaps for this reason Pythagoras deemed all things to be constituted and understood through the power of numbers" (DI 1:1, 3). Eternity, oneness, Creator, and creature are therefore translated into a code of numerical or symbolic relations. Cusanus thus develops a new mode of analogy in which form or number—things visible to the mind—are developed by seemingly logical steps until an impasse of thought yields an enigmatic symbol: a construct that can be formulated precisely but not conceived by the mind.

Analogy thus acquires a fresh profile in Cusanus, symbolizing what cannot be comprehended by reason.[11] He refers to enigmas—reminding us of the *per speculum in enigmate* of Paul's words which are translated in the King James Bible as, "through a glass darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12): "Now we see but a poor reflection; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." The effect of the translation into number and relation is not to obviate or explain away the mysteries of faith, but rather to make them all the more palpable and provocative.

[11] As Hopkins puts it, "Because analogies do not correspond to any reality to be found in Infinite Being or its relations, they are better called illustrations. Nicholas himself calls them *aenigmata,* i.e., symbolisms; and he uses them to direct the mind's reflection so that the mind's ignorance may be learned." *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance,* 16.

Cusanus's demonstration of the coincidence of opposites recalls Anselm's ontological proof of God's existence. The Absolute Maximum is that than which there can be no greater: "Hence, since the absolutely Maximum is all that which can be, it is altogether actual. And just as there cannot be a greater, so for that same reason there cannot be a lesser, since it is all that which can be" (DI 1:4, 11). The doctrine of the coincidence of opposites is necessary because we can deny no predicate to a God who is the infinite unity. The paradox that in God the greatest that can be coincides with the smallest that can be, is followed by elaborate demonstrations that the infinite line contains or enfolds all figures: the triangle, the curve, the circle, etc. From the infinite line that enfolds all figures in its infinite unity, book one of Learned Ignorance moves to the inconceivable figure of the infinite sphere: "In an infinite sphere we find that three maximum lines—of length, width, and depth—meet in a center. But the center of a maximum sphere is equal to the diameter and the circumference" (DI 1:23, 70). The definition of God as a circle with its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere has been traced back to ancient roots. The paradox fascinates the mind by its combination of precision and inconceivability.

In Cusanus, analogy as unlike likeness displays an extreme inner tension. Nothing in this world is like its divine origin—yet the sensible is still a "figure" of the supersensible, the temporal still a "figure" of the eternal.[12] The unlike likeness even projects its parameters back onto our own world: "Since the Maximum [i.e., God] is like a maximum sphere, we now see clearly that it is the one most simple and most congruent measure of the whole universe and of all existing things in the universe, for in it the whole is not greater than the part, just as an infinite sphere is not greater than an infinite line" (DI 1:23, 72). What can be known and measured is only knowable and measurable with reference

[12] For example, *De Principio* states: *"Nihil igitur in hoc mundo est eius similitudinem habens, cum non sit designabile nec imaginabile.... Mundus sensibilis est insensibilis mundi figura et temporalis mundus aeterni et intemporalis figura," Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften* 2 (Vienna: Herder, 1966), 254.

to what passes beyond knowledge or measure. Thought is not merely limited by, it may indeed depend on and implicate the unthinkable.

What is still distinctively medieval in his thought is the presentation of a kind of hierarchy of levels of being, each of which corresponds, in a manner that seems remarkable to us, to the transcendent unity of God. Since the infinite stands in no proportion to the finite, these levels are not a ladder that we can climb in order to get a glimpse of God. What the principle of ascent tells us is that all our concepts of God—and indeed all our notions of the world and its entities—are inadequate. Conversely, the incommensurability of the infinite and the finite leaves each level and eventually each human individual to its own immediate confrontation with the infinite being.

The levels conceptualized in *On Learned Ignorance* are: 1. God, as the "Absolute Maximum" and "coincidence of opposites" (whereby these terms are not understood as a positive statement about God, but rather as a circumscriptive term for God, as surpassing our finite understanding); 2. the world, which is called the *"maximum contractum"* and as such both mirrors and condenses the infinite unity of God; 3. the individual thing or creature, as a "contraction" of the world and hence as a likeness of all other things; 4. Christ as the Absolute Maximum, contracted or concretized in the individual Jesus; and 5. the Church as the mystical body of Christ. True to the pattern of *omnes in omnibus,* the Church contains a maximum diversity of individuals, each of whom reflects the truth by his or her own lights. *De Docta Ignorantia* concludes in a vision of a Christendom that encompasses diversity while remaining one. This is the voice of the politically minded churchman Cusanus, the figure involved in the disputes of the conciliar and papal parties, who favored first one side and then the other, always in pursuit of unity; the theoretician of compromise in the conflicts between Hussite heterodoxy and Catholic orthodoxy, Eastern and Western Churches, Christians and Muslims. The unity and harmony that could not be attained for parties in the real world of Cusanus is attained by the ideal individuals

of his thought: "For 'church' bespeaks a oneness of many [members—ach of whom has his personal truth preserved without confusion of natures or of degrees; but the more one the church is, the greater it is; hence, this church—[viz.,] the church of the eternally triumphant—is maximal, since no greater union of the church is possible" (DI 3:12, 261).

The Cusan coincidence of opposites conforms not only to a new outlook on society, but also to a changing view of nature. In the Cusan infinite, each part is also infinite. God is "all in all." All finite things are said to be in all other things. Cusanus knew the motif of *quodlibet in quolibet* from Eckhart's Latin works, where the designation of God as an infinite sphere with its center everywhere, its circumference nowhere, was discussed along with reflections on the mercy of a divine grace, of which the least measure for the Creator is the greatest measure for the creature. Between the inward-looking perspective of medieval reflective mysticism and the vitalistic theories of Renaissance and Baroque nature mysticism, there is a continuity in the use of the scriptural-philosophical motif of *quodlibet in quolibet* or *omnes in omnibus.*[13] Jasper Hopkins, who has performed a valuable service in distinguishing between errors in the Cusan reasoning and the misunderstandings of its interpreters, characterizes the notion of *quodlibet in quolibet* as "philosophically bizarre"; its ramifications are "based

[13] In Cusanus's marginal notations on Eckhart, *quodlibet in quodlibet* is a coincidence of opposites in the propositions about grace as the greatest and the smallest, and for the allusion to God's omnipresent center. See Dietrich Mahnke, *Unendliche Sphäre und Allmittelpunkt* (Haale/Saale: Niemeyer Verlag, 1937), 77—78. (Aus eigenhändigen Randbemerkungen in seinem ... Handexemplar von Meister Eckharts *"Opus tripartitum"* geht zunächst hervor, daß er bei der religiösen Venvertung der geometrischen Symbolik mit vollem Wissen und Willen mittelalterliche Traditionen fortsetzt. In einer der nur hier erhaltenen lateinischen Predigten, in der Eckhart sagt: "Nach den Lehrern genügt die kleinste Gnade, um den Sünden zu widerstehen. Denn das Kleinste von Gott [minimum deil ist das Größte hinsichtlich aller Kreatur," und zur Bekräftigung den Satz einer "Autorität" anführt, "daß 'Gott eine geistige Kugel ist, deren Mittelpunkt überall, [deren] Umfang nirgends [ist]'," hat der Kusaner das letztere Zitat am Rande durch eine Wellenlinie und Wiederholung der Anfangsworte *"quod deus"* als besonders interessant hervorgehoben. Ferner hat er in Eckharts Erklärung von Jesus Sirach, Kap. 24, V. 23/24, wo es heißt: "in göttlichen Dingen ist jedes in jedem und das Größte im Kleinsten," sei, "wie ein Weiser sagt, 'Gott eine unendliche geistige Kugel ist deren Mittelpunkt samt dem Umfang überall ist' und 'die ebensoviele Umfänge wie Punkte hat,' wie im gleichen Buche geschrieben wird," die den beiden Zitaten vorangehenden Eckhartschen Worte und den Anfang des ersten Zitats durch eine Wellenlinie hervorgehoben und die Worte *"in divinis quodlibet in quodlibet maximum in minimo"* wiederholt.)

on an altogether dubious notion of the relation between part and whole."[14] And yet at first glance, the logic of "all in all" is impeccable: if God is in all things, and they are in him, then all things are necessarily in all other things as well.[15] The difficulty—which we should not be surprised to encounter—is simply that we can't make sense of this state of affairs. Therefore, we need to ask if *quodlibet in quolibet* isn't "bizarre" in much the same way that the coincidence of opposites is bizarre. To rebuke or defend these propositions is not enough. The persistence of the motif of *omnes in omnibus* in German mysticism demands interpretation.

In *On Seeking God (De Quaerendo Deum),* Cusanus wrote that if we consider things in nature "with the eye of the intellect," we cannot doubt that in any piece of wood, stone, ore, gold, mustard, or millet seed all possible artful corporeal forms are potentially present *(omnes artificiales corporeas formas in potentia esse).* We know this because each has to contain the circle, triangle, rectangle, cube, and so on, in order to be able to give rise to other forms of animals, fruits, flowers, leaves, trees, as well as the likeness of all forms in this and countless other (possible) worlds. If a human artist can make a likeness of a king from a piece of wood, then so much greater is the skill of the divine Artist who fashions the likeness of all forms from a minute corporeal thing *(de quolibet minutissimo corpusculo).*[16] In this instance, the *quodlibet in quolibet* is validated by two considerations: 1. The processes of mutation, growth, flowering, and transformation in nature or salvation (the latter is alluded to in the *granum sinapis)* require that new things are potentially contained in certain other things; 2. the creation of all things from some "minutest corpus" requires that all were initially in one thing. "God therefore does not create out of anything else, but rather out of himself *(ex se),* since he is everything that can be." The fact that God creates from no material except his own being means that all things were in God,

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[14] Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance,* 24-25.
[15] Cusanus's exact words are: *"Nam cum manifestum sit ex primo libro Deum ita esse in omnibus, quod omnia sunt in ipso, et nunc constet Deum quasi mediante universo esse in omnibus, hinc omnia in omnibus esse constat et quodlibet in quodlibet." De Docta Ignorantia* 2:5, cited from: *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften* 1:344.
[16] Kues, *De Filiatione Dei (Die Gotteskindschaft),* in *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften* 2:600-603.

and he is still in all, and therefore through him all are in all. In a veritable hymn of paradoxes, God is characterized as *"in omnibus omnia, in nullo nihil et omnia et nihil in ipso ipse, integre, indivise in quolibet quantumcumque parvo et simul in nullo omnium ... ."*[17] All things in all, in nothing nothing, and indivisible in even the smallest of things! These paradoxes can be taken negatively, as expressions of the limits of rational discourse about God, or they can be taken positively, as a praise for the wonders of a creation in which everything arises from the least seed and the whole is "contracted" into each part.

Omnes in omnibus is a mystical precept that subsumes all sources of authority and in turn promises answers to questions in many spheres. The ultimate validation for the Cusan *quodlibet in quolibet* is the *omnes in omnibus* of the triune God, of whom each trinitarian person can, in its own respective way, be called "all in all": the Father in being, the Son in power, the Spirit in actuation *(Deus pater est omnia in omnibus, Deus filius potest omnia in omnibus, Deus spiritus operatur omnia in omnibus).*[18] To the intellectual vision that sees beyond the finite qualities of matter, the true nature of things mirrors the incomprehensible being of this triune divinity.

In *On Learned Ignorance,* Cusanus approvingly quotes the pre-Socratic Anaxagoras, *"quodlibet esse in quolibet,"*[19] thereby again confirming his claim that in some way all thinkers and all believers are really in agreement. Pythagoras is a source as well. Cusanus has a tendency to equate creation and generation with enumeration or with the construction of form[20]—as if all things consisted of points, lines, and figures, intensified into solid objects. Formally and numerically, all things can be said to be in all other things. This doesn't signify that they are in them actually. They are enfolded in them in the same way all figures are enfolded into the infinite line. "In a stone all things are stone; in a vegetative soul,

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[17] *Trialogus de Possest (Das Können-Ist)* in *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften* 2:356-57.
[18] *De dato patris luminum,* in Kues, Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften 2:672.
[19] Cited from Kues, *De docta Ignorantia* 2, 5, *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften* 1:334.
[20] Elsewhere, Cusanus says that the creating of the Creator is like the reasoning or counting of the reason. See *De dato patris luminum,* in *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften* 2:662 *("Et hoc ipsum est creatoris creare, quod est rationis ratiocinari seu numerari").*

vegetative soul; in life, life; in the senses, the senses; in sight, sight; in hearing, hearing; in imagination, imagination; in reason, reason; in intellect, intellect" (DI 2:5, 119).

The idea that everything is in everything clearly owes much to precedent and reasoning. If the one thing is to grow into all things, or anything is to turn into any other thing, there has to be a *tertium quid,* a medium with a universal potential. Indeed, Cusanus recognizes an eternal "creative force" or "virtue" *(virtus creativa).*[21] But on top of these other defining contexts, the term *omnes in omnibus* may also have been an experience conditioned by his age of conflict and change: a divinely reconfirmed article of faith in times of strife and threatened unity. There is a hint of immediate intuition when Cusanus tells us:

> Consider more closely and you will see that each actually existing thing is tranquil because of the fact that in it all things are it and that in God it is God. You see that there is a marvelous oneness of things, an admirable equality, and a most wonderful union, so that all things are in all things. You also understand that for this reason there arises a difference and a union of things. For it is not the case that each thing was able to be actually all things.... This, then, caused all things to exist in different degrees.... Therefore, in each thing all things are tranquil, since one degree could not exist without another—just as with the members of a body each contributes [something] to the other, and all are content in all. (DI 2:5, 120)

Anticipating the later panvitalism and universal harmony of the nature mysticism of the Renaissance, Cusanus conceives of unity here as the content of an intuition accessible to all who have eyes to see

[21] *Trialogus de possest,* 272.

it. The minutely individualized properties of things can be seen as inherently meaningful. All things are harmonious and beautiful by virtue of their tranquil being in God.

Out of the "enfolding" *(complicans)* Oneness of God, the world and all things in it are incomprehensibly "unfolded" *(explicata)* as manifestations of God. The world is a "contraction" of God. So is everything, in its own way. The universe is a likeness of the Absolute, and all things are images of God, reflected in various mirrors and at various distances. If God were to turn away from the world, the mirror images would vanish. The notion that all things are "contractions" of God is almost as mysterious as the notion of *omnes in omnibus;* however, either term serves the same purpose of conceiving the world, the human being, or the discrete thing, in the manner of an image—shortened or refracted perhaps, but nothing without the divine source which is everything in each individual contracted creation.

Cusanus undertakes a critical assessment of certain notions of nature. He evaluates the merits of the Platonic theory of a world-soul in accounting for the harmony of all motions—which presumably spring from one single guiding motion and entelechy. Although he rejects the doctrine of the world-soul, he finds certain elements attractive in the concept. In discussing it, he makes use of his own terminology of enfolding and contraction. He regards the Aristotelian criticism of Platonism as lacking in "deep discernment." In the final analysis, he rejects the world-soul only to the extent that it is considered as an independent creative agent mediating between the power of God and the motions of nature (DI 2:9 145-150). But since the Platonic concept is useful for his purposes, Cusanus employs "learned ignorance" to resolve the misunderstanding between Platonists and Aristotelians. The true mediating power in nature is the omnipresent Word: "Hence, the connecting necessity is not, as the Platonists maintained, a mind which is inferior to the Begetting Mind; rather, it is the divine Word and Son, equal with the Father. And it is called 'Logos' or 'Essence,' since it is the Essence of all things"

(DI 2:9, 149). Cusanus goes on to explain that, "only God is the 'world-soul' and 'world-mind.'" The philosophers conceived of the world-soul because they were not adequately instructed about the Divine Word and Absolute Maximum (DI 2:9, 150). Thus, Cusanus retains the functions and scope of the world-soul, since it proves useful in discussing order and life in the world; but he integrates nature with the universal informing power of the Word. The debate that he sees between Aristotelians and Platonists acquires relevance in the mysticism, philosophy, and theology of the next century. For his part, Cusanus reconfirms a long tradition in combining the Platonic-Neoplatonic understanding of the guiding power of spirit in nature with the Word as the divine utterance of creation:

> Therefore, this spirit, which is called nature, is spread throughout, and contracted by, the entire universe and each of its parts. Hence, nature is the enfolding (so to speak) of all things which occur through motion. But the following example shows how this motion is contracted from the universal into the particular and how order is preserved throughout its gradations. When I say "God exists," this sentence proceeds by means of a certain motion but in such an order that I first articulate the letters, then the syllables, then the words, and then, last of all, the sentence—although the sense of hearing does not discern this order by stages. In like manner, motion descends by stages from the universal *[universum]* unto the particular, where it is contracted by the temporal or natural order. But this motion, or spirit, descends from the Divine Spirit, which moves all things by this motion. Hence, just as in an act of speaking there is a certain spirit [i.e., breath) which proceeds from him who speaks—which is contracted into a sentence, as I mentioned—so God, who is Spirit, is the one from whom all motion descends. For Truth says: "It is not you who speak but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you." A similar thing holds true for all other motions and operations. (DI 2:10, 153)

As often before, the Word is the term for the unity of the created and uncreated worlds. However, with Cusanus the old mysticism of the cosmic Word is combined with new and remarkably modern theories of the universe. It would be a mistake to see this as a matter of pure scientific deduction. His "corollaries concerning motion" and nature turn the world into a kind of riddle; but, as is to be expected, his solution lies in an article of faith: his conceptualization of the hypostatic union of the two natures in Christ.

On Learned Ignorance in any event combines many kinds of speculation, even touching on empirical physics. In the chapter devoted to the "corollaries regarding motion," Cusanus reflects that no motion can be absolutely maximal and none absolutely minimal. The second negation rules out complete rest. No body within the universe, not the fixed stars nor the earth, can be stationary. The earth is not the center of the world; and the sphere of the fixed stars is not its circumference (DI 2:11, 157).

The infinity of divine measure and the inherent inequality and imprecision of all motions and relations not only undermines all certainties; the world here appears to be without bearings. Certainty is to be restored through the paradoxical vision of the inconceivable absolute which is God:

> 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 (DI 2:11, 157).

If we know now that the imprecision of measurement is not the hindrance to knowledge he saw it to be, Cusanus appears quite forward-looking in his awareness of the relativity of perceptions. He knows that we apprehend motion only through comparison with something fixed. If a passenger on a ship did not know that a body of water was moving or did not see the shore from the ship, he

would have no way of recognizing that the ship was in motion. Similarly, every vantage point imagines that it stands at the center of things; the person occupying it thinks that it is immovable and all other things in motion: "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" (DI 2:12, 162). Cusanus's world-view, with its relativism and its postulate of God as the Absolute Maximum to whom nothing can be denied, even leads him to regard the likelihood of intelligent life on other planets and stars, and even to recognize that the character of that life would have to reflect its planetary or stellar environment (DI 2:12, 171-172).

The conceptual center of the Cusan world-view is Christ as the "Concept of all Concepts." Book two of *On Learned Ignorance* establishes that the universal differences among all things are organized into species which differ by degree. However, there cannot be an infinite number of degrees, because this would be tantamount to no degrees at all. Nor can one reach the absolute maximum or minimum by an infinite regression. Nor can there be any world-soul, as an independent power between God and material nature. There is a gap in the conceptual structure of the world. The being of the Creator with the infinite fullness of actual and possible being is proximate to the created world, which contracts infinite possibility into finite actuality. This allows Cusanus to formulate the central concepts of his humanistic 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. Hence, human nature is that [nature] which, if it were

> elevated unto a union with Maximality, would be the fullness of all the perfections of each and every thing, so that in humanity all things would attain the supreme gradation. (DI 3:3, 198)

Christ, as the "Absolute Maximum contractum," stands at the new center of the conceptual structure of the world: the "Concept of Concepts." The intricate conceptual framework makes the union of the Absolute Maximum with the contracted maximum appear both necessary and incomprehensible. The real necessity and proof of this union reside for Cusanus in faith and Scripture. The answer to his enigmas is placed at the end of *On Learned Ignorance*. It is his evocation and interpretation of the Word:

> For Jesus—who is blessed forever, who is the goal not only of all understanding (because He is Truth) but also of all sensing (because He is Life), and who, further, is both the goal of all being (because He is Being itself) and the perfection of every creature (because He is God and man)—is, as the goal of every utterance, there heard incomprehensibly. For every utterance has come forth from Him and terminates in Him. Whatever truth is in an utterance is from Him. Every utterance has as its goal instruction; therefore, [every utterance] has as its goal Him who is Wisdom itself. "Whatever things were written were written for our instruction." Utterances are befigured in written characters. "By the Word of the Lord the heavens were established." Therefore, all created things are signs of the Word of God. Every corporeal utterance is a sign of a mental word. The cause of every corruptible mental word is an incorruptible word, viz., a concept. Christ is the incarnated Concept of all concepts, for He is the Word made flesh. Therefore, Jesus is the goal of all things.
>
> (DI 3:11, 247)

All created things are divine signs, all words are creatures. The truth or inner meaning of all meanings out of which every created utterance proceeds and to which it returns in its latent intention of revelation is the Concept of all Concepts. The intricate conceptual framework is designed to lead from every direction toward this prearranged outcome. In order to enhance the Word as the final answer to all mysteries, Cusanus heightens and multiplies the mysteries. In the process, he raises new questions, thereby creating a perspective that eventually proves fertile in the natural science of the Renaissance.

Hypothetical philosophical inquiry and unquestioned faith condition one another in Cusanus. This is why there is a thematic concordance of the more speculative works such as *On Learned Ignorance* and *On Conjectures* with the contemplative ones such as *On the Vision of God (De Visione Dei)* or *On the Sonship of God (De Filiatione Dei).*

In dropping the Eckhartian terms of mystical inwardness,[22] the function of Eckhart's terms—the confirmation of an immediate relationship with God—is recovered by means of the paradoxes of reciprocality: In the contemplation of God, seeing and being seen again coincide. Each creature only exists because it is seen by and also sees God.[23] These paradoxes are equivalent to the proposition that all things are contractions of God and of the world as a whole. The finite creature is created in the likeness of the infinite God. Divine infinity corresponds in the world of contraction and finitude to the absolute uniqueness of what is individual.

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[22] Cusanus drops or de-emphasizes Eckhart's cluster of notions having to do with the spark of the soul and generation of the only-begotten Son in the soul of the believer. See Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Dialectical Mysticism: Text, Translation, and Interpretive Study of "De Visione Dei"* (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1985), 29-30.

[23] See *The Vision of God,* trans. Hopkins in Nicholas of Cusa's *Dialectical Mysticism,* 131 ("To see You is not other than that You see the one Who sees You"), 173 ("You appeared to me as invisible by every creature since you are an infinite and hidden God. Infinity, however, is incomprehensible by every mode of comprehending. Later, you appeared to me as visible by all [creatures] because a thing exists insofar as You see it, and it would not exist actually unless it saw you"—italics added).

Cusanus expands on this individuality of being and knowing in his most contemplative work, *The Vision of God.* In it, the relationship of the believer to God is compared to perspective in the portraits that are crafted so that from every angle the eyes of the painted figure look directly into those of the spectator. Thus, writes Cusanus, God faces directly every believer who turns to him. Within God, all natures are embraced. The infinite majesty of God is hence correlative with the unique individuality of every believer. The author of The Vision of God inquires in contemplative prayer, "For what is more absurd than to ask that You, who are all in all (omnia in omnibus), give Yourself to me? . . . And while I am quietly reflecting in this manner, You, O Lord, answer me in my heart with the words: 'Be your own and I will be yours' *('Sis tu tuus et ego ero tuus')."*[24] In this tract, composed for the Benedictine monks at Tegernsee, Cusanus proved that the abstractions of his speculation concerning the infinite unity of God also had devotional-contemplative equivalents. In chapter ten, the Cusan coincidence of opposites is interpreted so that it functions virtually the same as Eckhart's unity of seeing and being seen, hearing and being heard—and so that it is also equated with the Paradise from which the children of Adam have been barred. Chapter ten utilizes the reflexive metaphor of Eckhart: the word broadcast by the preacher is like the speaking-creating of God which touches each individual distinctively. In chapter eleven, God as the "succession without succession" is compared to the contemplation of a clock: the successive striking of time can be understood as enfolded simultaneously into the concept of the clock, unfolding then as successive time.

The mystical faith as it is conceived by Cusanus is intellectually alert, encompassing the contemplation of God, as well as a human self-awareness and an endless striving for truth—a Faustian motif that can be traced back to Gregor of Nyssa. The themes of Cusanus's most characteristically mystical writings form a coherent whole with the more philosophical works. There is a "seeing of the

[24] Cusanus, *The Vision of God,* cited from Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Dialectical Mysticism,* 145-47.

mind" *(videre mentis),* he writes; this seeing surpasses "the ability to comprehend" *(posse comprehendere).* After distinguishing that one thing is greater than another, "the mind's simple power of sight" *(simplex visio mentis)* is drawn by the desire to view that which is beyond all measure.[25] This is the supreme object, the *apex theoriae* (as one of his works is called). Truth is integral, but it has many facets and aspects. According to *On Learned Ignorance,* the truth, as we discern it, is a temporally contracted "sign" or "image" of a supratemporal, intellectual, and divine truth (DI 3:7, 226). This is then amplified to a mystical epistemology in his *On Conjectures.* Our conjectures are said to arise in our mind, in the same way that the created external world arises in the infinite divine ground *(Coniecturas a mente nostra uti realis mundus a divina infinita ratione prodire oportet.*[26]) Speculative thought is thus itself a contracted reflection of the infinite divine being.

This daring confirmation of the authority of a conjecturing, seeking, speculating mind is probably the most promising legacy of Cusanus. He is said to have exerted little influence on later German philosophy and mysticism (except through Giordano Bruno who then transmitted something of his thought to later thinkers, including Leibniz and the German Romantics).[27] The Reformation scarcely knew him at all; and even within the Catholic Church, his theories lapsed into discredit or oblivion. As a blow for toleration, his *On the Peace of Faith* is also rather ambivalent. The cards are always stacked against other faiths. It has been observed that the goal of his pluralism is unity; and that his toleration disregarded those who lacked power for rivalling hegemony—the Jews in fifteenth-century Germany.[28]

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[25] See *De apice theoriae,* in Nikolaus von Kues, *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften* 2:373 *(Posse igitur videre mentis excellit posse comprehendere. unde simplex visio mentis non est visio comprehensiva, sed de comprehensiva se elevat ad videndum incomprehensibile, uti dum videt unum maius alio comprehensive, se elevat ut videat illud, quo non potest maius. Et hoc quidem est infinitum maius omni mensurabili seu comprehensibili).*

[26] *De coniecturis,* in Kues, *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften* 2:6-7.

[27] Cf. Karl Jaspers, *Nikolaus Cusanus* (Munich: Piper, 1987), 226ff.

[28] See Charles G. Nauert, Jr., *Toleration in the Thought of Nicholaus of Cusa* (M.A. Thesis, University of Illinois). According to Nauert, Cusanus even acted to increase restrictions placed on German Jews.

But neither should one underestimate his universalism or the bold example it set for Humanistic thinking. The mere fact of his knowing and thinking about other religions had a positive effect. It was in Cusanus's spirit of informed Humanism that Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522) initiated the Hebrew and Kabbalistic studies that provided him the incentive and competence to take a position against the confiscation and burning of Jewish books during the struggle of Humanism against obscurantism at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

Beginning with Cusanus and continuing from the fifteenth through the seventeenth century, the themes of German mysticism are expanded and reinterpreted. There is a great tendency toward syncretism. The inner world of reflective mysticism is replaced by the outer world of nature mysticism. It is portentous—a sign of a tradition at the crossroads—that Cusanus anticipates the Faustian typology, even while warning the readers of *On Learned Ignorance* to be on guard against the evil magician—the wicked counterpart to the mystic's striving for union with God through knowledge and faith. The magicians claim that by faith and with the assistance of magic practices a man can become united with "a nature of influential spirits...akin to himself," and by their power perform miracles involving fire, water, musical knowledge, transformations, or the revelation of things hidden: "For it is evident that with regard to all these [wonders] there is deception as well as a departure from real life and from truth. Accordingly, such [magicians] are bound to alliances, and to pacts of unity, with evil spirits" (DI 3:11, 253). Forming covenants with evil spirits, the magician here emerges as the wicked man of faith, striving for forbidden transcendence and illicit knowledge. The magician is the false mystic who perverts theory and practice by usurping higher powers.

The outer limits of transgression have been drawn. The shadowy figure of the magician will soon make his spectacular entrance into German intellectual history: in the historical-legendary figure of Johann Faust.