

AMERICAN
CATHOLIC
PHILOSOPHICAL
QUARTERLY

NICHOLAS of CUSA
Edited by Louis Dupré

Introduction & Cusa's Major Works
LOUIS DUPRÉ

Power of the Possible
PETER J. CASARELLA

Perception, Conjecture, and Dialectic
CLYDE LEE MILLER

Contingentia and Alteritas in Cusa's Metaphysics
THOMAS P. McTIGHE

The Epistemologies of Lull and Cusa
THEODOR PINDL-BÜCHEL

On The Infinite: Cusa and Descartes
KARSTEN HARRIES

Mystical Theology and the Intellect
DONALD F. DUCLOW

Pantheism in Eriugena and Cusa
DERMOT MORAN

Nature and Grace in Cusa's Mystical Theology
LOUIS DUPRÉ

Volume LXIV Winter 1990 No. 1

THE NEW SCHOLASTICISM
formerly
THE NEW SCHOLASTICISM

Pantheism from John Scottus Eriugena to Nicholas of Cusa

by Dermot Moran

Writers in the Christian Neoplatonic tradition from Dionysius the Areopagite to Nicholas of Cusa have been accused of conflating the being of the creature with the divine being, a heresy which later received the name "pantheism." In the fifteenth century, for instance, John Wenck, a theologian from the University of Heidelberg, reacting to the coincidence of contradictory doctrine in Nicholas of Cusa, accused him, among other things, of teaching that God was a creature, and that God and human nature were identical.¹ This is one of the typical ways in which the problem of pantheism was interpreted in the medieval theology. Aside from the general accusation that the creature and God are identical, medieval authorities specifically accused the alleged pantheists of teaching that every man is God and further that a stone or some such material object is God. How does Cusanus react to this accusation?

I. Some Preliminary Clarifications

But first let us begin with a *caveat*. In examining the tradition stemming from Dionysius, we must be careful not to treat all these thinkers as belonging to a fixed doctrine of *theologia negativa* whose boundaries and *modus operandi* were clearly established. The concept of a *via negativa* is itself too crude to be applied wholesale to the complex "dialectical" structures of Dionysius and his medieval followers. Theirs is a tradition which in fact asserts divinity beyond affirmation and also beyond negation. It is not strictly speaking a *via negativa* but a sequence

¹*De ignota litteratura* (written 1442–3) translated by J. Hopkins, in his *Nicholas of Cusa's Debate with John Wenck: A Translation and an Appraisal of De Ignota Litteratura and Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*, 2nd ed., (Minneapolis: Banning Press, 1984), p. 30. In his reply, the *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* (1449) Cusanus accused Wenck of holding a personal grudge against him, going back to the days of the Council of Basel.

writings of Jacobi; this new term sought to preserve the divine transcendence while acknowledging that all things are in God (*pan en theo*).³ The distinction between pantheism and panentheism is not strictly tenable. Dionysius, Eriugena, Eckhart and Cusanus all maintain both that God is in all things as their essence (God is the *forma omnium* or the *essentia omnium*) and that all things are in God. Indeed both assertions can be seen to be contained in Sacred Scripture and non-pantheistic writers such as Aquinas are also committed to both such interpretations.⁴

Indeed Cusanus defends his approach by citing Anaxagoras fr.6 (*en panti panta*) in his *De docta ignorantia* II.v.117 (*quodlibet esse in quolibet*) to argue that God is in all things and all things are in God. In the late 18th century, Hoelderlin and Hegel also made Anaxagoras's *hen kai pan* their catch-cry. It is of crucial hermeneutical importance to recognize that Eriugena, Eckhart, and Cusanus were in suspicion of being pantheists because of their stress on the manner in which God is present in things. The metaphysical implication of this word is at the base of the controversy. Early condemnations however refer to a doctrine whereby God is said to be the being of all things.

The 13th century condemnations of Eriugena refer specifically to the doctrine that God is *forma omnium*, a doctrine associated in its most radical statement with Almericus of Bène (who died c.1206).⁵ A second

³E. R. Naughton writing in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* defines panentheism as the doctrine that "all things are in God without exhausting the infinity of the divine nature." Too often the word alone is trotted out in defence of an author accused of pantheism.

⁴Christian philosophers understood Scriptural texts such as Paul 1 Corinthians 15:28 ("Deus erit omnia in omnibus, God may be all in all") as supporting the claim that God is in all things. See for example Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* 1. 7. 596c; Eriugena, *Periphyseon* I.450d; Cusanus, *De docta ignorantia* III.ix.235 (hereafter *De docta ignorantia*). Similarly all made use of the pseudo-scriptural statement that God is the beginning, middle and end of all things. Other favorite scriptural texts which were interpreted in this manner were Colossians 1:16–17 "in him were created all things in heaven and earth . . . and He holds all things in unity" see for example Dionysius *De divinis nominibus*, hereafter (*DN*) 2.637b; Romans 11:36 (Vulgate: quoniam ex ipso et per ipsum et in ipso sunt omnia) which Eriugena transcribes with the addition of *ad ipsum* at *Periphyseon* I.500a, II.551c, 553a, 574c; III. 623d, 669a; V.867c, 871a; see Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* 13. 980b; *Coelesti Hierarchia*, hereafter (*CH*), 1.121a and 4.708a. Another favorite scriptural texts is John 1.3–4. These texts support both a pantheistic and a panentheistic reading, and indeed the two meanings cannot be separated.

⁵Nicholas of Cusa appears to have agreed with Almericus's condemnation but defends the thought of David of Dinant. Cusanus claims in the *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* 29 (Hopkins, trans., p.61) that Almericus did not rightly understand that God is all things "by way of enfolding" (*complicatio*), and that he fell into

version of this doctrine, whereby it is stated that God is the *materia omnium*, is linked with David of Dinant (died c. 1214).⁶ It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the validity of the case against Almericus of Bène and David of Dinant. It is unlikely that Cusanus knew any of Almericus's writings and in general he seems to agree with Wenck in associating Almericus with the Lollards, Beghards, and other heretical groups. Cusanus of course knew about these heretics from Thomas Aquinas (in the *Summa theologiae*, *Summa contra gentiles*, *De veritate* xxi.4, and in the Commentary on the Second Book of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*), Albertus Magnus (in the *Summa de creaturis*, c.1248), as well as from other medieval chroniclers.

Aquinas in the *Summa theologiae* (I.3.8. *responsio*) and *Summa contra gentiles* (I.17, I.26) distinguished between Almericus and David as follows: Almericus taught that God was the *forma omnium* whereas David taught "the really stupid thesis" that God was the prime matter of all things (*materia omnium*). No doubt Cusanus was familiar with this distinction, yet despite his distancing himself from Almericus in the *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, Cusanus frequently calls God the *forma omnium* or *forma formarum*, for example in *De docta ignorantia* I.xxiii.70 and II.ii.103.⁷

error because he did not use the method of learned ignorance. Cusanus appears to have known of Almericus through John Andrea's (1270–1348) *In quinque Decretalium libros novella commentaria*. On the other hand, Cusanus appears to recommend David of Dinant's work (which he may have known directly) in his *De li non aliud* xvii.81.

⁶Nicholas of Cusa includes David of Dinant along with Marius Victorinus, Eriugena, Honorius Augustodunensis and Berthold of Moosburg as authors who should be read only by the wise. But he does not condemn David of Dinant. Through a confusion by a Laon chronicler, medieval authors assumed that David influenced Almericus. On historical grounds alone this is most unlikely. David was an Aristotelian commentator who actually seemed on good terms with Pope Innocent III and certainly frequented the papal court. See *The Cambridge History of Twelfth Century Philosophy*, ed. by P. Dronke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 429–43. David was condemned for his teaching of Aristotelian physical writings by the Synod of Paris in 1210.

⁷Eriugena says that God is the *forma omnium* at *Periphyseon* I.499d but modifies this immediately by saying that God is also without form and beyond form. The statement must be both affirmed and denied (I.500b). The phrases *forma omnium*, and *forma formarum* are already found in Augustine, and indeed Robert Grosseteste defends these phrases as applied to God in his letter, *De unica forma omnium*, which Professor McEvoy has dated as written soon after the condemnation of 1225. In Book III of the *Periphyseon* Eriugena identifies God as *nihil* and distinguishes two kinds of nothingness, *nihil per excellentiam* (God) and *nihil per privationem* (prime matter), so it is easy to see how David of Dinant could have been interpreted as identifying God and prime matter. In the margin of his copy of the *Periphyseon* at this point (I.500a) Cusanus notes "quomodo deus et materia

Very soon after the first condemnation of Almericus by the Parisian Synod of 1210, Alexander of Hales made a distinction between the heretical statement that all things are identical with the divine essence ("*omnia sunt divina essentia*") and the orthodox view that *in God* all things are identical with the divine essence ("*omnia sunt in ipsa divina essentia*"), and indeed Cusanus is always emphatic that in God all things are God. This is a consequence both of the absolute indivisible unity of the divine first principle, and also of the Neoplatonic view that all things have their exemplars in God. In discussion of pantheism in relation to medieval authors therefore we must be careful to restrict our attention to the declarations that God is the form, matter or essence of all things, and is really present in things and things in him.

In this paper I want to examine Nicholas of Cusa's links with such doctrines which received formal condemnations in 1210 and 1225 and in the writings of Albertus and Aquinas. Among the accusations levelled against the Amauricians and against David of Dinant was that they taught that each human was God or even that every stone is God, that God is *lapis in lapide*. As a matter of fact Cusanus deals with this accusation head on, and his invocation of the name of David of Dinant three centuries after the latter was declared a heretic can only be seen as a provocative defence of that writer and of himself, a defence that J. Hopkins has declared was probably ambiguous and unwise.⁸

What does Cusanus say of the relation between Creator and creature? Does he say baldly that the being of the creature is God, that, as it were, God is *lapis in lapide*? Aquinas actually refers to the claim that God is in a stone in *Summa contra gentiles* I.26.9, where he denies that God is the formal being of any thing. For Aquinas, Almericus and others have neglected the fact that things-which-are have diverse natures and thus *are* in different ways. At *Summa contra gentiles* I.17.7 Aquinas specifically charges David of Dinant with having neglected the distinction between difference and diversity (*differentia* and *diversitas*), a distinction

habent infinitatem," a remark which again may be interpreted as linking together God and formless matter. The first writer to fully identify God and matter is Giordano Bruno in his *De causa, principio et uno* which is influenced by Cusanus and by David of Dinant.

⁸Similar charges were levelled against Eckhart. The articles listed in the Bull *In agro dominico* of March 27th 1329 as heretical in the writings of Eckhart contain many which allege that God and man are one and the same such that whatever God does the good man can do and vice-versa. See for example Articles 12, 13, 14, 20 and 21, trans. by E. Colledge and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart. The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defence* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 77-81. Cusanus writes strongly in defence of Eckhart in the *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* 25-26 (Hopkins, trans., 58-59) saying that Eckhart never simply maintained that the creation was the Creator.

which Aquinas took from Aristotle, *Metaphysics* X.3.1054b24. Things which differ often belong to the same species or genus, but it is a simple ontological fact for Aristotle and Aquinas that there simply are diverse genera, different *types* of things. When Cusanus says that God is the essence of all things, is he not obliterating this very diversity?

II. The Metaphysical Background

First let us briefly set down the metaphysical structure which the thinkers of this tradition assume is a given. All the thinkers of the Neoplatonic Christian tradition assert that there is a fundamental non-complex unity which grounds the universe, and that this unity can neither be grasped by the human intellect nor articulated in language. All speaking concerns what is next to it and does not reach the One itself.⁹ Secondly, this ultimate unity, God, can be known in a certain way by a kind of not-knowing or ignorance or unknowing.¹⁰

Thirdly, this unknowing is produced by the simultaneous assertion and denial of opposite characteristics; or by the progressive negation of characteristics; or by the recognition that affirmative speaking is essentially figurative and that images must be correctively displaced, until a mystically purified intellectual insight is obtained.¹¹

⁹In asserting that there is a common tradition, it must be borne in mind that the links between Eriugena and Cusanus are a matter of on-going research, but it is clear that Eriugena had a considerable impact on the formulation of Cusanus's thought. It is not possible to give a full account of these links but we know that Cusanus possessed and annotated a manuscript of the *Periphyseon* Book One and also Honorius Augustodunensis's *Clavis physicae*, itself a paraphrase of the *Periphyseon*. He also knew Eriugena's *Homilia* which he thought was written by Origen and which he cites in the sermon *Verbum caro factum est* (Sermon XIX) delivered in 1438. It is possible that Cusanus knew Eriugena's Commentaries on Dionysius but his reference to Eriugena's Commentary on the *Mystical Theology* is a misidentification. For a study of the exact relations between Eriugena and Cusanus see W. Beierwaltes, "Eriugena und Cusanus," in *Eriugena Redivivus*, ed. by W. Beierwaltes, (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Verlag, 1987), 311-43 and also C. Riccati, *Processio et explicatio. La doctrine de la création chez Jean Scot et Nicolas de Cues* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1983).

¹⁰In fact the phrase *docta ignorantia* appears first in Augustine, *Epistola* 130, PL XXXIII.505, and the concept of knowing through unknowing appears also in the *De ordine* ii, 16, 44 (PL XXXII.1015) where it is said that "deus scitur melius nesciendi." Eriugena links this Augustinian phrase with Dionysius at *Periphyseon* II.597d. Eriugena is the first to interpret Augustine as a negative theologian in essential agreement with Dionysius.

¹¹It is clear that Cusanus sees the activity of purification as primarily intellectual rather than as a matter of emotion or of the self-abandonment produced by love. Cusanus was criticized on this point by Vincent of Aggsbach. See J. Hopkins,

Fourthly, the divine nature itself appears to operate with a parallel affirmation and denial of its own essence which leads to the establishment and reintegration into the divine unity of the created world. This affirmative movement is understood as involving the creation of the finite world, and the negative movement is understood as the overcoming of the finitude of the created order and its reintegration into the One. In Dionysius this movement is *proodos/epistrophe*; in Eriugena, *exitus/reditus*; in Cusanus, generally *explicatio/complicatio*. Since the creation of the world is frequently spoken of as a self-externalization of God, and since human nature as image of God is taken to be the medium for the divine self-expansion (all the more because God is both divine and human by essence or nature) then the problem of pantheism has frequently arisen. In connection with the charge of pantheism it is usually alleged that pantheists hold that creation is a necessary emanation without independence from the divine first principle. This emanation is alleged to contradict the genuinely Christian doctrine of a non-necessary ("free") creation which produces a dependent yet thoroughly separate realm of beings. It must be pointed out, however, that for Christian Neoplatonists, including Aquinas, the term *emanatio* is frequently used as a synonym for *creatio*, and the kind of necessary relation which holds between creation and Creator is one-sided: necessary from the point of view of the dependent created being; neither necessary for, nor even known by, the Creator whose Oneness transcends all relation to another.¹²

For this reason Augustine, Dionysius, Eriugena, Aquinas and Cusanus all agree that God has no relations outside himself, and that in particular he has no accidents. Created being then sits in no accidental relation to the Creator. This leads to the assertion that since there is nothing outside God and God has no relations outside himself, and no accidents, then the existence of creation (which none of these authors deny) must be one with the Godhead itself, or belongs to an internal relation. In Eriugena's *Periphyseon* Book I. 517b ff the assertion that God has no accidents leads to the assertion that God is not a combination of essence and accident because he does not admit of number in any way and thus when it is said that God makes something, nothing else is to be understood but that "God is in all things, that is, that he is the essence of all things."¹³

Nicholas of Cusa's Dialectical Mysticism, 2nd ed., (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1988), 15-6.

¹²Nicholas of Cusa uses the term *emanatio* for the manner in which the existence of the universe was brought about at *De docta ignorantia* II.iv.116 (Hopkins, trans., 2nd ed., p.97). See also Eriugena *Periphyseon* I.506c.

¹³"Cum ergo audimus deum omnia facere nil aliud debemus intelligere quam deum in omnibus esse, hoc est essentiam omnium subsistere," ed. Sheldon-Williams, Vol. 1, p. 208. Note the construction "nil aliud" which is very frequently used by Eriugena to express the non-otherness of God and creation. It seems

Cusanus makes use of the doctrine of the non-accidentality of divine relation to creation at *De docta ignorantia* II.iii.110, and of the doctrine of the mere nothingness of created being taken without reference to its cause, to argue similarly that God is the *complicatio* of all things and also the *explicatio* of all things (II.iii.111). God is not strictly speaking substance, because some accident is essential for a substance, nevertheless God is the *quidditas absoluta mundi* (II.iii.116). It is clear here that Aquinas and Cusanus agree that God is not really to be understood as a substance, since substance implies accident. Cusanus goes further than Aquinas by making use of the terms *essentia*, *quidditas* and *actus* for God without a theory of the nature of existential act and the differentiation of existence by essence.

Fifthly, and most problematically, this tradition asserts that not only is God better spoken about using negations, but also the negations themselves have to be abandoned, and that God is beyond all assertion and denial, beyond all being and non-being, beyond both logic and nonsense. This "escape clause" can make all theological speaking impossible. However it is usually invoked to show that these authors do not intend even in the remotest way to assert a link between God and creation, far less a pantheism—an identity of God and creation. This last declaration that God is beyond all things, that he is the "negation of all things" (*negatio omnium*, as Eriugena puts it in *Periphyseon* III.686d), seems to contradict the assertion that God is the essence of all things. At this point theologians of this tradition invoke the possibility of a speaking which is neither strictly assertion nor denial, but somehow either a dialectical combination of the two, or else a figurative language that merely hints at something which is in fact inexpressible. In this tradition, there appears to be a search for a divine language beyond declarative propositional structure, beyond *apophansis*, irrespective of whether the declaration takes the affirmative or negative form. Eriugena and Cusanus while seeking this "other speaking" nevertheless see the negative as the more fruitful way.¹⁴

At its most extreme, the *Mystical Theology* asserts that nothing can either be affirmed or denied about God (including this statement itself?)

probable that Cusanus found the basis of his conception of God as *Non Aliud* already contained in Eriugena's *Periphyseon*.

¹⁴See Cusanus *De possest* 66.lines 2–4, Hopkins, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa* 3rd ed., (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Pr., 1986). See also *De Beryllo* 11 (12:13–16) and *De filiatione dei* 6 (84:12–15). Indeed Eriugena also (agreeing with Cusanus) interprets the superlative manner of speaking about God (e.g., "God is superessential, supernatural, etc") as essentially negative in meaning. See *Periphyseon* I.462b. Aristotle treats of affirmations and negations as types of apophantic utterance at *De interpretatione* 6.17a25.

and that God is known only by a radical unknowing that strips our understanding bare of its concepts and images. At the same time there is a clarificatory movement—the movement of *aphairesis* or stripping bare and this movement is of higher value than any affirmative theological utterances no matter how subtle.¹⁵

III. The Identity of Creator and Creature

Dionysius's key position is that God is unknowable and yet all things in the world are somehow traces of their unknowable cause. God is the being of all things. Nevertheless Dionysius states that "the being of all things is the divinity above being" (*to gar einai panton estin he huper to einai theotes, Coelesti Hierarchia* PL 3.117d) a phrase that will be repeated by Eriugena and Cusanus. Aquinas (*Summa contra gentiles* I.26.10) interprets this phrase as non-panteistical, in that it clearly notes that the divine nature is "above" the being of creatures, and that the phrase really means that there is in creatures a likeness of the divine being. Eriugena (e.g., *Periphyseon* I.443b) and Cusanus however will interpret the phrase to suggest that God both is the being of all things (*esse omnium*) and at the same time transcends all created (or finite) things (*super esse*). Cusanus however actually cites Aquinas as agreeing with his own interpretation in his *Apologia* 17, and goes on to say that such a statement can only be understood by learned ignorance.

Although superficially Aquinas also holds that in God all things are God, he does allow that the creature's being is entirely different from God. Eriugena and Cusanus however identify the Creator and creature quite emphatically. Thus Eriugena in Book III of the *Periphyseon* makes the famous claim that God and the creature are one, and Cusanus repeats this very explicitly in both the *De docta ignorantia* and in the *De dato patris luminum*: "Thus it seems to be the case that God and the creation are the same thing—according to the mode of the giver *God*, according to the mode of the given *the creation*."¹⁶

Eriugena argues that the creature is a manifestation of God and that God contains the creature. Cusanus on the other hand understands the

¹⁵There are strong similarities between this position and that of Proclus in his *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*—the use of negations, the inexpressibility of the One. See Book VI. 1072–1077. Proclus actually says the negations are the cause of the corresponding assertions. It is interesting to note that negative theology prefers the concept of *aphairesis* to *steresis*.

¹⁶*De dato patris luminum* 2.97, trans. J. Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Metaphysic of Contraction* (Minneapolis: Banning Pr., 1983), p. 117. The Latin is: p. 180 "Videtur igitur quod idem ipsum sit deus et creatura, secundum modum datoris deus, secundum modum dati creatura." See Eriugena *Periphyseon* III.678c: "Proinde non duo a se ipsis distantia debemus intelligere deum et creaturam sed unum et id ipsum."

two as two *modi* or aspects of the relation of giver and given. These versions are so close to each other that direct influence seems inescapable, especially given the radicalness of the doctrine under discussion. Cusanus in *De dato patris luminum* is slightly more circumspect than Eriugena in that he immediately qualifies his remarks with the statement that such speaking lacks precision (*praecisio*, II.98. 1.21). On the other hand Eriugena had introduced the concept of *modi* or modes of understanding very early in the *Periphyseon*, and also operates throughout with a general distinction of *causaliter/effectualiter* which is equivalent to the notion of manifest and unmanifest. For Eriugena God is unmanifest until he creates and creation is his self-manifestation.

Eriugena speaks of a divine self-creation which is one with the manifestation of itself in another. Self-creation and world-creation are not to be understood separately in Eriugena. They are two timeless aspects of the one hidden incomprehensible reality. Thus at *Periphyseon* I.455a-b Eriugena says:

For when you say that it [the divine nature] creates itself the true meaning is nothing else but that it is establishing the natures of things. For the creation of itself, that is, the manifestation of itself in something, is surely that by which all things subsist?¹⁷

Dionysius does speak of God's self-manifestation as a self-diffusion of the good, but he does not speak of the divine self-creation. Eriugena however emphasizes it in several places. Later in Proposition 118 of *De li non aliud*, written in 1462, Cusanus states that the creature is the manifestation of the process of self-grounding or self-definition of the divine nature: "therefore the creature is the manifestation of the Creator defining Himself—or the manifestation of the light, which is God, manifesting itself."¹⁸

For Eriugena the world is a *processio* from God, for Cusanus it is God's self-explication (*explicatio*). Thus Cusanus states in *De docta ignorantia* II.iii.111

God is the enfolding (*complicatio*) and unfolding (*explicatio*) of all things, in so far as he is the enfolding, in Him all things are Himself, . . . in so far as He is the unfolding, in all things He is

¹⁷Sheldon-Williams's translation, Book One, p.67. The Latin is "Nam cum dicitur se ipsam creare nil aliud recte intelligitur nisi naturas rerum condere. Ipsius namque creatio, hoc est in aliquo manifestatio, omnium existentium profecto substitutio."

¹⁸"Creatura igitur est ipsius creatoris sese definientis seu lucis, quae deus est, se ipsam manifestantis ostensio," in J. Hopkins, ed., *Nicholas of Cusa on God as Not Other*, 143-44.

that which they are, just as in an image the reality itself is present.¹⁹

Again the Platonic metaphysics of the image is here modified through the Cappadocian and Eriugenian tradition such that the image has only got reality in so far as it has the reality of the exemplar. Thus image and exemplar are in fact identical, not just similar. In this respect Cusanus and Eriugena agree, and differ from Aquinas, who argues only for a likeness between creatures and God, a likeness which is real only from the creature's point of view. We must note here that for Eriugena an effect is specifically the cause made manifest, an effect is a "made cause." There is nothing in the creature which is not in the original cause, and the creature exists only in so far as it possesses the being of the cause. Hence creaturehood per se is a kind of nothingness, and divine creation is not creation of another but self-creation.

Eriugena develops a concept of self-creation as a kind of negation of an initial nothingness. Thus self-negation becomes self-creation. This is almost the reverse of the Hegelian process of the self-negation of the Absolute as the first determination of the finite. Werner Beierwaltes has pointed out that of the late Neoplatonists only Eriugena has this concept which is mirrored in German Absolute idealism.²⁰ In Eriugena the Godhead (*deitas*, *Periphyseon* II.562b), to use a term differentiated by Eckhart, is a hidden nothingness (*nihil*) whose first act of self-negation (the nihilating of the primordial nothingness) is the self-creation of God.²¹ This self-creation of God, is at the same time the *manifestatio in aliquo* or self-illumination into the created world, which is synchronous with the divine self-creation. Both the creation of the world and the self-creation of God are two aspects of the one process, and indeed a third aspect is brought into play when it is recognized that the self-speaking of the

¹⁹Hopkins, trans, 2nd ed., 95–96.

²⁰W. Beierwaltes in his excellent study *Denken des Einen*, (Frankfurt, 1985), esp. 281–95 argues that the concept of a productive, creative, objectifying negation is neither Plotinian nor Proclean (p.291) but emerges first only in Fichte and Hegel. For the Neoplatonists negation is a reflexive category of thought, not in the One, whereas in Hegel it is an actual element of the self-explication of the One itself. However Beierwaltes does recognize that Eriugena is an exception to this Neoplatonic tradition and does refer to the self-negation of the divine as the affirmation of the created world. See also W. Beierwaltes, *Visio facilis—Sehen ins Angesicht. Zur Coincidenz des endlichen und unendlichen Blicks bei Cusanus* (Muenchen: Verlag der bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1988).

²¹Although Eriugena stresses the validity of the term "*nihil*" for God, Cusanus does not propose this name himself. For Eriugena the name is found in Dionysius and has Biblical authority. Cusanus will say that God is *nihil omnium* at *De docta ignorantia* I.xvi.43, but stops short of using the term *nihil* on its own to refer to God.

Verbum is itself the self-manifestation of God. Thus self-manifestation is itself a complex process, and one which should not be thought of in simplistic "pantheistical" terms as the identity of Creator and creature *tout court*. Self-manifestation is at once both self-negation and self-affirmation, and also *negati affirmatio*, the affirmation of the negation.²²

How is it with Cusanus? The *De li non aliud* is the most sophisticated attempt to explore the divine self-relation. First of all Cusanus recognizes the need for a new concept of relation. He is aware of the Thomistic analysis of relation (in relation to creation) but thinks this has to be first of all grounded in the self-relation of the concept of relation. The idea of absolute relation as a self-relation which achieves its self-identity through its relatedness to itself is what motivates Cusanus's discussion of definition. A definition before it defines anything else has first of all to be self-defining and self-grounding. Where the act of defining and the thing defined are one then the definition is a proper self-definition. This is the formal condition. The material condition is the *Non aliud* which defines itself by its not-otherness from itself. The *Non aliud* defines itself and hence it defines or contains everything else as well.²³

In *De Li non aliud* I.4 Cusanus asserts that God is best understood as a self-defining identity: "*Non aliud est non aliud quam non aliud*," (The not-other is not other than the not-other). This formulation for Cusanus expresses both the set of identical relations within the Godhead and the non-externality of the relations with the other (i.e., with created being). Cusanus is, he claims, articulating a concept which is prior to identity and difference. Yet it is not quite the identity of identity and non-identity which Schelling in his *Bruno* dialogue was to make into the first principle of Absolute Idealism.²⁴

Rather Cusanus (here undoubtedly influenced by Eriugena) is beginning with a negative formulation—not-otherness—or perhaps with a double negative, if otherness is thought of as negation (as indeed it is in the tradition stemming from Plato's *Sophist* and *Parmenides*). Indeed Cusanus here deliberately sets himself against Wenck and the Neoaristotelians by proclaiming that Aristotle did not reach the heights of *prima*

²²For an excellent study of this concept in Eriugena see W. Beierwaltes, "*Negati affirmatio: Welt als Metapher*," *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 83 (1976), 237–65. For Eriugena the manifestation of the created universe is both a lighting up of the world and of course a darkening of the world, since it hides the source from which it has come.

²³*De li non aliud* i.3, ed., Hopkins, 30–31.

²⁴See W. Beierwaltes, "Absolute Identity: Neoplatonic Implications in Schelling's *Bruno*," in D.E. Christensen, M. Riedel, R. Spaemann et al, eds., *Contemporary German Philosophy* Vol. 2 (University Park: Pennsylvania State U.P., 1983), 73–99. Giordano Bruno himself had adopted the principle of the coincidence of opposites from Cusanus.

philosophia because he remained within the logic of identity and the principle of non-contradiction. For Cusanus, Aristotle made a mistake when he argued that to posit a contradiction of contradiction would lead to an infinite regress (*Apologia* 6; *De li non aliud* xix.89). Cusanus argues that a contradiction of contradiction is possible as long as we look at it antecedently (*anterioriter*), where it is without contradiction. Cusanus claims to be able to see things another way, to see things in their undifferentiated origin. It is interesting to note that Cusanus refers to *prima philosophia* as *prima seu mentalis philosophia* and this latter formulation suggests that metaphysics for Cusanus is actually subsidiary to the mental power of seeing modes of non-otherness. In general as we have seen, creaturehood and Creator are two modes of viewing, not two distinct ontological realities.

IV. The Coincidence of Opposites

The reference to a contradiction of contradiction without contradiction brings us to the well-known, but much misunderstood formula of the coincidence of opposites. In *De docta ignorantia* Cusanus gives a number of ambiguous formulations of his concept of the divinity. God is the *coincidentia oppositorum* and also beyond the *coincidentia oppositorum*. Cusanus has many different formulations of coincidence—including coincidence of contraries, opposites as well as of contradictories. In *De visione Dei* (ch.xiii, para. 55) he says that coincidence is contradiction without contradiction (*contradictio sine contradictione*).²⁵

His concept of the coincidence of contraries is not meant to abolish the law of non-contradiction, rather it is the recognition of the possibility of opposites coming into a non-contradictory, non-oppositional relationship. The logic of contradictories is actually secondary, derivative and proceeds from the logic of the Same (*Idem*), a term Cusanus will also use for God. This is another way of talking about self-identity. Eriugena too had used many metaphors for this and had also explored various forms of identity—such as thinker, thinking, and thought, or the various non-oppositional relations of the Trinity. Cusanus will do likewise. The question in relation to pantheism is whether such a non-oppositional

²⁵Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Dialectical Mysticism*, 180. He also says here that the infinite exists above this coincidence of contraries. God is *oppositio oppositorum sine oppositione* in *De visione Dei* ch.xiii, para 55, Hopkins, 180. In this work Cusanus attributes to Dionysius the expression opposite of opposites without opposition. This exact phrase however appears first in Eriugena. Strictly speaking there is no concept of the *coincidentia* of opposites either in Dionysius or in Eriugena. Eriugena does talk about God as the *oppositio oppositorum* (I.517c) or as a *armonia* of opposites but not as a *coincidentia*. Cusanus makes use of the concept of an *oppositio oppositorum sine oppositione*.

worlds, an infinite number are actualized in God. It is a short step from this to the actualization of infinite worlds in a cosmos which has been identified with God, as we find in Nicholas's admirer and follower, Giordano Bruno.²⁷

Among the possibles which God enfolds is of course the actually existent created world. This world then has, as it were, a double existence—its exists maximally and uncontractedly in God and it also has a contracted, relative, not fully actualized existence in itself. What of particular things—stones, humans and so on? As pure possibilities they exist in God—that is, God can conceive of them, even if they never exist on this earth. Nevertheless, in God they are wholly actual, and for this reason even a stone is in God a coincidence of opposites (in this case possibility and actuality), and is also one with God. Thus in God there is a certain legitimacy in saying that a stone is God, or that God is a stone.

To say that God is a stone and also that God is a man, is also to say that a stone and man are identical in some way. Thus the absolute essence (or set of possibilities) of a stone is not other than the essence of a man, Cusanus maintains in *De li non aliud*.²⁸ Cusanus recognizes that all created things bear similarities with each other, and image each other in certain ways. Using the Platonic position that things are as they are because of their participation in the Form, Cusanus argues that there can be only one image which is the Absolute Essence of Imageness and this will by definition be a perfect image and a perfect image is one which is identical with its archetype (a point Eriugena had insisted upon—*De docta ignorantia* I.xi.30). Cusanus recommends that in studying images we should pay attention to their relations and especially to their "*transumptiva proportio*" (I.xi.31), a concept which is not further explained. But he does state that we must go beyond the study of simple likeness (*simplex similitudo* I.xii.33) and instead study finite relations in a metaphorical or transferred way such that we understand from the perspective of the infinite.²⁹

²⁷Cusanus posits only one universe which has not maximized all its possibilities, and hence could be other than it is. Bruno in his *Cause, Principle and Unity* dialogue argues that the universe is a unity of act and potency such that it infinitely actualizes all possibilities.

²⁸He even argues that two carbuncles which differ in size are absolutely the same, due to their *substantia absoluta*, *De li non aliud* xii.45. Here however he agrees that they differ in terms of their possibility to exist (*possibilitas essendi*). Elsewhere he identifies their absolute possibility with their absolute actuality.

²⁹Here Cusanus's terms are *transferre* and *transumere* (*De docta Ignorantia* I.xii.33). Ultimately this terminology owes more to Eriugena than to Dionysius. It is Eriugena who argued that affirmative theology is not literal, not said *proprie*, but metaphorical (*metaphorice, transferre*). Cusanus prefers mathematical meta-

Although there is no *proportio* between finite and infinite, nevertheless our minds, basing themselves on the finite relations between things, must make an infinite adjustment in order to grasp (incomprehensibly) the absolute. In terms of our discussion of a stone, Cusanus is proposing that we think of the likenesses among things and then, as it were, using an infinite magnification, try to envisage the pure unrestricted infinite possibility of stone, or man, or moon. As we do this we receive theophanies of the divine being.³⁰

We have seen that each thing, maximized to its infinite possibility, is exactly God. There cannot be a host of different maximal things, now that potency is identified with possibility. Anything which fulfills all possibilities becomes every other thing. Thus each thing in its infinite possibility (i.e., its essence) is God. But God is the only being who is actually (i.e., who actualizes) each infinite thing. Cusanus distinguishes between things in their infinite possibility as actualized in God, their eternal essence or set of possibilities, and the manner in which things exist in this created universe, their contracted natures. He argues that things exist contractedly in this world.

V. The Concept of Contraction

Cusanus's mechanism to overcome pantheism is the concept of contraction. Contraction is a condition of creatures which is not to say that God actively contracts himself in order to produce the creatures.³¹ All things other than God exist as contracted (*De docta ignorantia* ii.9.150: *solus deus est absolutus, omnia alia contracta*). In *De docta ignorantia* II.viii.139 Cusanus states that the contraction of possibility is from God but that the contraction of actuality is as a result of contingency. Here Cusanus promises to explain further in the *De coniecturis* how possibility contracts into actuality, unfortunately he never completes this promised task. Nevertheless it is clear that the concept of contraction comes from a

phors in talking about the relations between things, and between the Creator and creature.

³⁰Cusanus introduces the notion of an actually existing infinity. God actually is an infinite number of things as well as being each thing in its full infinite range of possibilities. When God is all things, he is each thing in every possible way. Thus if a stone can be heavier or lighter then God is the actuality of both of these possibilities. Furthermore, Cusanus does not restrict God's being to actualizing only potencies in the stone, God also actualizes every possibility of the stone (e.g. that a stone can think).

³¹Hopkins is too polemical about this in his *Dialectical Mysticism* 61. There is a genuine sense in which the world is God's self-contraction. On the other hand, strictly speaking, God does not contract himself—although he is responsible for essences which contract acts of existence.

meditation on the nature of possibility and actuality. Contraction does not mean solely contraction of genus to species and species to individual, although it includes that sense. This contraction does not just mean the manner in which the genus "animality" is included in the species, "man," and in which both genus and species are included in the individual, "Socrates."³²

It is clear that the concept of contraction which applies Cusanus's understanding of Aristotle's notion of potency and act to theology, does not exist at all in either Dionysius or Eriugena or indeed in Eckhart. What is the meaning of this concept? The term *contractio* appears in Aquinas as a term to explain how it is that potency limits act, and it is in this regard also used by Cusanus who develops the term in many subtle ways.

According to *De docta ignorantia* II.iv.116, "contraction means contraction to something, so as to be this or that" and here he also says that the created universe is the *primum contractum*.³³ In this text *contractio* is closely associated with the manner in which a genus is represented in (or compressed into) the species, and the species retained in the individual. Thus contraction refers to the manner in which absolute possibility becomes parcelled out as it were into the more limited potencies possessed by things, according to the *ordo* of the great chain of being (referred to in *De docta ignorantia* III.iii.201).

³²Hopkins in his argument against Blumenberg says that Cusanus talks about the contraction of a genus to a species and not of God as maximum to the universe. This is not quite true—God contracts himself into the contracted maximum of the Word, who is an individual. Moreover the contracted maximum coincides with the contracted minimum. The protestation of Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance*, 2nd ed., 199 n.19, which continues in his argument against Blumenberg in *Nicholas of Cusa's Dialectical Mysticism* (1988) is unnecessary in that it ignores the cosmological role of Christ himself as both individually contracted human and also as absolute maximum.

³³"The first contracted [thing]" and not, as in Hopkins's translation, "the contracted first" (2nd. ed., p.97). Hopkins's translation here makes no sense: Cusanus goes on to say that the *primum contractum* is in this respect a maximum which is not possible on Hopkins's reading despite his "explanatory" note; the reason the contracted universe is a maximum is because it is contraction at its maximal level—i.e. the first contracted thing. Of course this will lead to difficulties in Book III where Cusanus wants to say that the Second Person of the Trinity is the union of maximum and individual and is the universal contracted being (*universalis contracta entitas*) of every creature. Here Cusanus says that it is through Christ that all things receive their contractedness (*De docta ignorantia* III.iii.199). In fact Cusanus, following Eriugena in this respect, is identifying the timeless emanation of the universe with the self-expression by God of his identical *Verbum*. Hopkins is unfair to Blumenberg on this point, see Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Dialectical Mysticism* 2nd. ed. (Minneapolis: Banning Pr., 1988), p.61. As we shall see, God is called *contractio contractionum* by Cusanus.

Perhaps the most detailed explanation of the meaning of *contractio* appears in Cusanus's text *De dato patris luminum* where he contrasts contraction with the absolute, as the finite is contrasted with the infinite and the singular with the universal: "Recipitur igitur infinitum finite et universale particulariter et absolutum contracte."³⁴ Cusanus uses metaphors to explain the process of contraction, thus, for example, the color of a colored thing is a contraction of colorless light (ii.100); the hand of Socrates is a reception of the form of Socrates but in a contracted way, that is, Socrates's hand is precisely not Socrates *absolute* but is Socrates in a participatory and derivative way (*contracte*) and similarly with all other forms. In fact Cusanus invokes the hierarchy of being to show how angels, humans, lions, etc. are all contractions of the universal form of being (*universalis forma essendi*).

For Cusanus there is an absolute dimension and there is a dimension of contraction, a secondary dimension derived from the first. These correspond roughly with the Creator and the created order. Is creation contraction? What is the relation between *contractio* and *explicatio*? It would appear that God explicates himself in an absolute unbounded manner. God cannot but radiate infinitely in all directions. As Cusanus says in *De dato*, God as absolute goodness imparts himself undiminishedly (*communicat se indiminate*, ii.97, ll. 14–15). From the point of view of God then there is only infinite self-explication, infinite self-manifestation, the creation of infinite possibilities. From the point of view of the creature, however, there is only contractedness, failure to achieve the maximum, limitation. *Contractio* is the manner in which the creature experiences the divine *explicatio*. Thus we can see that although God is uncontracted, as Cusanus says many times, nevertheless he can be called absolute contraction or the *contractio contractionum* (*De visione dei* II.8, ll. 14–15) since God's self-explication is not other than the creature's experience of contractedness. Repeatedly Cusanus's tactic is to assert the widest gulf between the two modes of understanding (*absolute* and *contracte*) and yet argue that there is only one Being of all things. Again we are dealing with *prima seu mentalis philosophia*.

How does this square with the orthodox Christian view (metaphysically expressed by Aquinas and Wenck) that each thing has its own being which is different from (though a participation in) the divine being?

³⁴*De dato patris luminum*, ii.99, lines 5–6, in Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Metaphysic of Contraction*, 182. Note that the concept of the "reception" of the absolute in the contracted form is not dissimilar to St. Thomas's notion of the reception of act by potency or of the *esse* by the *essentia*. See for example *Summa contra gentiles* I.29.5 where Thomas says that God has "absolutely" what the creature possesses by a "diminished participation."

Wenck accused Cusanus of teaching that all things coincide with God, and also accused him of destroying the "individual existence of things within their own genus."³⁵ Wenck himself argues for the Thomistic doctrine that all created things are distinct from God and exist only as sustained by the divine power, and since they do need to be sustained by God, they cannot be identical with God. Furthermore Wenck accuses Cusanus of holding that creation was eternal, which for him goes against the very meaning of creation. Thus, Wenck says, Cusanus is guilty of "deifying all things, annihilating all things and supposing that annihilation is deification."³⁶

In particular Wenck accuses Cusanus of identifying creature with Creator in such a way that the essence of the creature is said to be identical with the essence of the Creator. Thus Wenck accuses Cusanus of asserting that God is the absolute quiddity (or essence) of things. This in turn produces a confusion between creatures, since if all creatures have an identical essence (i.e., God) then they are not different from each other. Therefore, Wenck argues, Cusanus is teaching that "the absolute quiddity of the sun is not other than the absolute quiddity of the moon."³⁷ Wenck was partially correct. Cusanus does indeed say in the *De docta ignorantia* II.ix.149 that God creates all things not by means of diverse essences but through himself who is absolute essence. God is the essence of all things and all things have their fullest actuality in God where they are not other than God. Thus a thing considered in God is God, considered in itself it is a dependent thing. But he warns that we should not think of the existence of a thing as another thing:

For it is not the case that the being of a thing (*esse rei*) is another thing (*aliud*) as a different thing is (*ut est diversa res*); rather its being is derivative being (*abesse*). If you consider a thing as it is in God, it is God and Oneness.³⁸

Cusanus distinguishes two modes of existence of the thing—and, with these, two different essences or quiddities. Everything has a restricted nature or contracted quiddity (*quidditas contracta*) which is its own and makes it what it is in this contracted universe. In this universe then we can speak of a difference of quiddity between the sun and the moon. On the other hand God is the absolute essence or quiddity of all things

³⁵Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Debate with John Wenck*, 27.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 35.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 36. This is actually a version of the accusation levelled in the 13th century against David of Dinant and Almericus of Bène, namely that they taught that God was the essence of all things such that He is the stone in stone (*lapis in lapide*).

³⁸*De docta ignorantia* II.ii.110, trans. Hopkins, 95.

(*quidditas absoluta*) such that God is the absolute essence of sun and moon. Cusanus goes on in *De docta ignorantia* II.iv.115 to add an important qualification: "it is not the case that God is in the sun and in the moon; rather he is that which is sun and moon without plurality and difference." This qualification is ignored by Wenck's crude approach.

On the other hand, it is difficult to blame Wenck, because Cusanus returns again and again to this problem of the existence and nature of individual created things in other works, in such a way that he does not entirely dispel the feeling that he is identifying Creator and creature. In general Cusanus consistently asserts—in a phrase borrowed from Dionysius and mediated through Eckhart, that God is neither this nor that, is not to be conceived of as an individual being.³⁹ It is in the *modus complicandi* that all things are God, in the *modus explicandi* God is not any of these things.

In the *De dato* Cusanus says that God is not to be equated with individual things. It is true that God is (absolutely) the form of all things (*forma essendi* ii.98) but not in such a way that he becomes each thing's individual (or contracted) form:

Therefore God is not the form of the earth, of water, of air, of aether, or of any other thing; rather, He is the Absolute Form of the form of earth or of air. Therefore, earth is neither God nor anything else, but is earth; and air is air, aether, and man—each through its own form. For each thing's form is a descent from the Universal Form, so that the form of earth is its own and not another's—and likewise for other forms.⁴⁰

In later works, however, Cusanus appears to alter this formula. In the *De li non aliud* (written in 1462) in particular he states boldly that "in the sky God is not other than the sky."⁴¹

Here Cusanus is applying the reasoning of the "not other." In itself the Godhead is itself, in the other it is not other than the other (*"non aliud quam ipsum aliud"*). Cusanus here is specific about the manner in which the Godhead is immediate in the being or essence of creaturehood. God is the sky in the sky, he cannot be "other" than the sky. Since everything is identical with ("not other" than) itself then this very self-identity, its essential relation to itself, is precisely where the divine enters. The divine

³⁹See for example *De docta ignorantia* I.xvi.43 where Dionysius is invoked, and *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* 31, p.63.

⁴⁰Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Metaphysic of Contraction*, 118.

⁴¹"[Deum] in caelo esse non aliud quam caelum" *De li non aliud* ch. 6, para 20, J. Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on God as Not-Other: A Translation and an Appraisal of De Li Non Aliud*, 2nd ed., (Minneapolis: Banning Press, 1983), 49.

is this "not other" which makes the sky (identical with) the sky. Cusanus has found a novel way to express the absolute immediacy of the divine relation with the creature, and yet done so in a manner which is not as unorthodox as it first appears. According to Thomistic doctrine, the being (*esse*) of the creature is what is most intimate to it, and this *esse* is itself a participation in the divine *esse*. In Cusanus's version, what is most intimate to the thing is its own nature or essence, and it is identical with this essence by virtue of its participation in the "not-other". Although at times Cusanus makes use of the Thomistic expressions, act of being (*actus essendi*) and essence (*essentia*), his Neoplatonic inheritance tends to emphasize the nature, essence, quiddity, reason or form of the thing (*essentia, quidditas, ratio, forma*) and the relation of that quiddity to absolute quiddity. What is interesting in Cusanus's later formulation is that, like the Thomistic account of the relation of creation (dependency), the creature's self-relation exists only because of its participation in the divine self-relation. But the divine self-relation is by definition only with itself, thus the divinity strictly speaking is not related to the creature, although the creature is necessarily related to it: "For it does not create the sky from an other, but through the sky, which in itself is itself"⁴²

Cusanus likes this formulation: it is through the sky that sky is sky. At other times he says that it is through the sky that God is the sky. Each formulation aims at protecting the Godhead from external relations. All relations come through the creature, and this indeed is one with Aquinas's account of creation as a relation in *Summa theologica* I.45 and 46. Cusanus accepts the orthodox formulation but also offers several reformulations of his own.

Clearly Cusanus is actually asserting that God is "*lapis in lapide*" and thus following directly in the tradition of thinkers condemned by the judgments of 1225, and yet at the same time denying that God is somehow limited by being the essence of each individual thing. When the created thing in question is human nature then the lines become even more blurred. To think of a human being as absolute and incontractible (*De docta ignorantia* II.v.122) and yet as also uniquely existing as a person is in fact to think of God. We can sympathize both with Wenck and with Cusanus. Perhaps for us the most important lesson is that the problem of the relation of creature to Creator remains inexpressible, as only one of the *relata* is actually known. As in Cusanus's case, to understand more we must understand our own ignorance.

⁴²"Non enim creat caelum ex alio, sed per caelum, quod in ipso ipsum est," *De li non aliud* ch.6 para.22, Hopkins, trans., 50. Hopkins's translation here is accurate in meaning but is not literal. His version reads: "For Not-other creates the sky not from an other but through the sky which in Not-other is Not-other."