Aristotle – Contemporary Perspectives on his Thought

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On the 2400th Anniversary of Aristotle's Birth

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Aristotle's Conception of οὐσία in the Medieval Christian Tradition: Some Neoplatonic Reflections

It would be impossible to review in detail the medieval Neoplatonic Christian reception of Aristotle, even in the period prior to the 'rediscovery' of Aristotle's key texts (including the *Physics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Metaphysics,* and the biological writings) in the mid-twelfth century. What was known of Aristotle before the eleventh century was largely what is known, somewhat inaccurately—as it was larger—in the medieval curriculum, as the *logica vetus*, i. e., the *Categories*, *De Interpretatione,* and Porphyry's *Isagoge* ("Introduction" in Boethius's translation).[1] Other texts were included in the *logica vetus*, but the only works truly known were the three just cited. To further compound the confusion, a number of false texts circulated, most notably the *Liber de Causis* that was thought to be a work by Aristotle but was actually a Proclean text.[2] Boethius was the major influence and he synthesizes Aristotle and Plato. Cicero knew the *Topics* but others knew it only through Cicero. The *Categories* was a favorite work of the Neoplatonists who wrote many commentaries on it.[3] The main debate was whether it was a work of logic and semantics (as Andronicus of Rhodes thought) or a work of ontology.

Around 1120 Boethius' translations of the *Prior Analytics*, *Topics*, and *Sophisti Elenchi* were re-discovered. Around 1150, James of Venice translated Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, *De anima*, and *Posterior Analytics*. Eventually, the rediscovery of Aristotle provided a new research agenda for the newly-founded universities of the thirteenth century, inspiring the writings of Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, Robert Grosseteste, Roger Bacon, and others. The Neoplatonic tradition which antedated the rediscovery of Aristotle was not vanquished and continued to flourish, however, especially in the theology faculties, following the old tradition that Aristotle was a good guide to the sublunary world, but that Plato was needed to understand the unchanging intellectual world. Furthermore, Platonism and the idea of a divine goodness 'beyond being' continued, especially in the Christian negative theological tradition, including Bonaventure, Meister Eckhart, and

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1 See Marenbon (2014), 349 36.
2 Brand (2001).
3 Griffin (2015).

others, who conceive God (or more properly *deitas*) as intellect 'before being' and 'cause of being.'

In this paper, I shall focus on the reception of Aristotle in this continuous Christian Neoplatonic tradition, specifically in St. Augustine (354–430 CE), Johannes Scottus Eriugena (c. 800–c. 877 CE), and Nicolas of Cusa (1401–1464 CE), thinkers who 'book end' Medieval philosophy from its beginning to its conclusion. I shall focus especially on the tradition of the *via negativa* (into which St. Augustine is inducted by Eriugena's radical hermeneutics) which eventually evolved into the *docta ignorantia* of Nicolas of Cusa.

The Christian philosophical tradition in the early Middle Ages had enormous respect for Aristotle, despite a lack of familiarity with the primary sources. Aristotle is described by John Scottus Eriugena, for example, as "the shrewdest of the Greeks" (*acutissimus apud Graecos*, *Periphyseon* I.463a).[4] Aristotle was known to the Carolingians largely through the section on *dialectica* in the Liberal Arts textbook of Martianus Capella, his *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, and through the anonymous *Categoriae Decem* text, a fourth-century Latin summary of Aristotle's *Categories*, which was often attributed to St. Augustine (hence "Pseudo-Augustine"), but now is thought to come from the circle of Themistius.[5] In general, and entirely understandably given the available works, Aristotle was regarded as a logician and rhetor. His conception of the categories was well known, although there was a general sense that these categories applied only to the created world and that the infinite God could not be comprehended within the categories, but surpasses them. Alcuin's (c. 735–804 CE) *De dialectica*, for instance, is based on the *Categoriae decem*. Interestingly Eriugena, an expert on dialectic, will introduce a new form of dialectic of opposites, of affirmations and negations (*homo animal est*; *homo animal non est*), which he will equate with the Dionysian contrast between kataphatic and apophatic theology. Eriugena is the first explicitly to link Aristotelian logic to the Neo-Platonic dialectics of affirmation and negation.

Aristotle's theory is invoked in relation to the question as to whether the ten categories can be applied to the "ineffable nature" of God (*PP* I.457d), a discussion that is inspired by Augustine's *De Trinitate* Book Five and by Boethius' theological tracts, as well as by discussions in Maximus Confessor. In particular, Eriugena proposes an overarching category that goes beyond the ten categories—something "called by the Greeks τὸ πᾶν (*to pan*) but by our writers *Uniuersitas*" (*PP* I.469b) which is the "*universalis natura*" that admits of four divisions.

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4 Henceforth the *Periphyseon* will be cited as "*PP*."
5 Marenbon (1980).

This is Eriugena's originality, along with his conception of God as self-creating (*se creare*), interpreted as 'manifestation in another' (*manifestatio in aliquo*).

1 Augustine's Reading of Aristotle's Categories

Let us briefly look at the intellectual background, namely, St. Augustine's relationship to Aristotle. Augustine saw Aristotle primarily as a logician and seems to have known of him largely through Cicero. Cicero claims to write his *De Oratore* (On the Orator) "in the Aristotelian style" (*scripsi igitur Aristotelio more*, *Ad Fam*. i.9.23; *Ad Atticum* xiii.19.4). Augustine generally considers Aristotle's work to be obscure, as he says in *The Advantage of Believing* (*De Utilitate credendi* 6.13) and, indeed, "defective" (*De pulchro et apto*).[6] He will, however, be very interested in Aristotle's treatment of the categories.

Augustine had been introduced to philosophy by reading Cicero's *Hortensius* (*Conf.* 3.4), which may have been a Latin version of Aristotle's *Protrepticus*. Aristotle's association of happiness (*beatitudo*) with contemplative knowledge is praised by Augustine. In *De Dialectica* Augustine refers to Aristotle's distinction between single and combined words, and possibly he had access at some stage to Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* which may have influenced his theory of signs in *De Doctrina Christiana*.[7] Augustine's discussion of time in *Confessions* Book Eleven shows some knowledge of Aristotle's *Physics,* and this will be taken up by Eriugena.

When Augustine was about twenty (*Conf.* 4.16.28), he read Aristotle's *Categories* probably in the Latin translation of Marius Victorinus (*Conf.* 4.16). He even reports that he was able to read it without the help of a teacher. However, as Augustine interpreted the Aristotelian doctrine of substance, he found that it limited him in his way of thinking about God. Augustine writes:

> The book [*The Ten Categories*] seemed to me to speak clearly enough of substances, such as a man is, and of what are in them, such as a man's figure; of what quality he is; his stature; how many feet tall he is; his relationships, as whose brother he is; where he is placed; when he was born; whether he stands or sits; whether he is shod with shoes or armed; whether he does something or has something done to him; and the innumerable things that are found in these nine categories, of which I have set down some examples, or in the category of substance. (*Conf.* 4. 28)[8]

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6 See Tkacz (2012), 71.

7 Fitzgerald/Cavadini (1969).

8 Augustine (1960), 118.

In other words, Augustine had tried to understand God by applying the Aristotelian categories. Augustine generally knew of Aristotle's doctrine of the four elements and of the soul as a "fifth element," but worries his account is too materialistic (*De immortalitate animae* 10.17; *De civ. D.* 12:11; *De Genesi ad Litteram* 7.21.27).

Augustine refers to Aristotle's *Categories* again in his *De Trinitate* Book Five to discuss the Neoplatonic view that none of the categories, strictly speaking, applies to God. In *De Trinitate* Augustine uses *substantia* and *essentia* interchangeably and he generally thinks that only the category of substance can apply to God. Augustine conceives of God as the fullness of being, as "Being Itself," *Ipsum Esse* (*De Trin.* 5.2.3; *De Trin.* 6.7.8) or *Idipsum Esse* (*De immort. an.* 7, 12; *De lib. arb.* 3, 20 – 21; *De mor. Eccl.* 1, 14, 24, "therefore we must love God... of whom I will say nothing else than that he is being itself," *idipsum esse*).[9] Of course, Augustine is interpreting the famous *Ego sum qui sum* of Exodus 3:14, which he understands as identifying God with *Ipsum Esse* (see *De Civitate Dei* 8.11), which is also identified with Platonic unchangeable and immutable being.

Augustine says it is hard to name God, although we know *that He is* and that He is the greatest of all beings. In *De libero arbitrio* 3.7.20, he speaks of God as "*id quod summe est*." Some scholars argue that *Idipsum* ("self-same") cannot be identified with *ipsum esse* ("being itself").[10] Normally, Augustine identifies *idipsum esse* with *quod est*, and *quod aeternum est* (*En. In Psalmos.* 121.5, PL 37, 1621 – 22). In particular, Augustine is identifying God with self-identity, permanence, immutability. At *De vera religione* 21.41 Augustine says "*idipsum, id est naturam incommutabilem*" (cf. *De Trin.* 3.3.8). God is the One who never changes, who is self-same. This emphasis on *Idipsum esse* was read, especially in the Greek Orthodox Christian tradition, as emphasising the unspeakable nature of the divine; God cannot be named; His essence cannot be expressed in language by finite beings. Thus *Idipsum esse* can be understood as an apophatic appelation. Indeed, the contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion has taken this discussion up in order to recuperate Augustine over and against the Thomistic reading of Gilson and others.[11] In fact, Eriugena anticipated this negative reading of St. Augustine a thousand years earlier and was already proposing St. Augustine as a negative theologian saying more or less the same thing as Dionysius.

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9 Zum Brunn (1988), 101. Burkill (1974), 1 17.
10 See Marion (2008), 171.
11 Ibid. 167 191.

2 Οὐσία in Eriugena's *Periphyseon*

Let me briefly introduce Johannes Scottus Eriugena and his *Periphyseon* before discussing the role of Aristotle. The Irish-born, Christian Neoplatonic philosopher Johannes (c. 800–c. 877 CE), was known in his own days as "Scottus," or the "Irishman," and he signed himself, in the oldest and best surviving Berne manuscript of his translation of Dionysius the Areopagite's complete works, "*Eriugena*," meaning "born in Ireland."[12] This pen-name became attached to him largely to distinguish him from John Duns Scotus in nineteenth-century histories of philosophy where he became known as "Scotus Erigena" and now "Scottus Eriugena."

Eriugena's main work, *Periphyseon*, is a sprawling dialogue, divided into five books, between a teacher and student (named simply Nutritor and Alumnus). It purports to be a systematic "study of nature" (*physiologia*, *PP* IV.741c), a Neoplatonic *summa* on the meaning of *universitas rerum*, that is, everything gathered under "universal nature" (*universalis natura*, *PP* II.525b). The title *Periphyseon* is Eriugena's own (see *Expositiones* II,1038) and was clearly meant to echo Origen's *Peri Archon*,[13] and, moreover, Eriugena wrote with his own hand in the manuscript Reims 875 "*peri physeos merismou*," "*concerning the division of nature.*"

The teacher in the dialogue, Nutritor, sees himself as a cosmologist (*fisicus*, *sapiens mundi*), but also as philosopher, *philosophus*, and theologian, *theologus*, who is conducting an "inquiry into natures" (*inquisitio naturarum*, *PP* II.608c) guided by "nature, the teacher herself" (*natura ipsa magistra*, *PP* II.608d). The pupil is more or less a foil for the teacher, asking questions and eliciting more clarity from the Teacher, but sometimes the pupil shows a great deal of knowledge. So, the structure of the dialogue is actually quite complex and dynamic.

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12 John Scottus ("the Irishman") is referred to by Prudentius in his *De Praedestinatione* (851) as a follower of Pelagius (*Pelagii ... sectatorem Ioannem videlicet Scotum*, *PL* CXV.1011B), who alone "Ireland sent to Gaul" (*te solum ... Galliae transmisit Hibernia*, *PL* CXV.1194a). He is mentioned by Bishop Pardulus of Laon (as quoted by Remigius) as "that Irishman, who is in the king's palace, named John" (*Scotum illum qui est in palatio regis, Joannem nomine*' (*PL* CXXI.1052a). Johannes Scottus signs his letter of dedication to his translation of the works of Dionysius with the pen name "Eriugena." Eriugena corrected and extended the earlier translation of Dionsyius by Hilduin and challenges anyone who doubts his translation to check the Greek (see *PL* CXXII.1032c). On Eriugena's life, see Cappuyns (1933) and Moran (1989), 35 47.

13 See Jeauneau (2014), 139 182. Eriugena's work appears in medieval libraries as "*Periphyseon id est de naturis.*"

At the outset of *Periphyseon* Book One, Nature is defined as the "general name for all things that are and all things that are not" (*Est igitur natura generale nomen, ut diximus, omnium quae sunt et quae non sunt*, PP I.441a) that includes "both God and the creature" (*deus et creatura*, PP II.524d). In the course of the dialogue, he gives an account of the nature of the divine One, its cosmic outgoing into created nature, and its return into its own hidden depth. Eriugena then proposes a "fourfold division" (*quadriformis divisio*) of nature:

> nature which creates and is not created,
> nature which creates and is created,
> nature which is created and does not create, and
> nature which is neither created nor creates.

These divisions (also referred to as "forms" and "species," *formae et species*) express the various aspects of the divine manifestation and also enumerate the stages of the cosmic procession out of and return to God. Everything takes place within Nature, and hence God is also present in all four divisions.

The fourfold division of nature is both "from God and in God" (*de deo et in deo*, PP III.690a). God is initially described in Augustinian terms as the "light of minds" (*lux mentium*, PP I.442b), but also as "the cause of all things that are and are not" (*causa omnium quae sunt et quae non sunt*, PP I.442b). Yet at the same time, God can be understood as a non-being above being, a superessential nothingness dwelling in divine darkness. This insight, inspired primarily by the Greek Neoplatonic tradition and specifically Dionysius the Areopagite, had a profound impact on Eriugena.

Interestingly, when Aristotle was first being revived in the newly founded University of Paris, it was through the teaching of David of Dinant (c. 1160–c. 1214) and Amaury (Almericus) of Bène (d.1206). Little is known about these two teachers except through the condemnation of their works. David of Dinant, an Aristotelian commentator and possibly a master at Paris, and Almericus, who taught theology at Paris, were both condemned at the Synod of Paris in 1210. David's *Quaternuli* is specifically cited. Eriugena's *Periphyseon* is mentioned in relation to this condemnation in the papal condemnation by Pope Honorius II in 1225, and so Eriugena is drawn into the theological dispute. Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa theologiae* (1.3.8. *responsio*) and *Summa contra gentiles* (1.17, 1.26) 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*). Albertus Magnus also discusses Almericus and David. The basis of the heresy seems to be the identification of God with the matter or form of the created universe. Of course,

Eriugena's apophatic approach to the divine rescues him entirely from this charge, which would later be known as pantheism, but Eriugena will use the phrase *forma omnium*—although he will also insist that God is beyond all form and is formless. He does refer to God as *essentia omnium,* which might be seen as veering close to a pantheist formulation.

While emphasising the fundamental agreement between Christian Fathers, Eriugena generally favoured Greek Eastern Christian over the Latin Christian formulations of specific theological doctrines. In particular, he esteemed the enigmatic, but deeply spiritual, writings of that pious forger Dionysius the Areopagite, whom he calls *summus theologus*, *sanctus Dionysius*, *magnus Dionysius Areopagita* (*PP* III.644a) and *praeclarissimus episcopus Athenarum* (*PP* III.644b). While he fully recognises that Dionysius disputes in an "involved and distorted" manner (*more suo perplexe yperbaticeque disputat*, *PP* I.509c), nevertheless, for Eriugena, he has unique insight into the mysteries of the divine nature, the "hid divinity" (*occulta divinitas*). The chief characteristic of this theological tradition is its emphasis on God as "above being" to the extent that God may be called a "non-being." Thus, right at the beginning of *Periphyseon* Book One, Eriugena blends both the affirmative description of God as *essentia omnium* and also says he is "*super esse diuinitas*" (*PP* I.443b):

> And rightly so: for as Dionysius the Areopagite says, He is the Essence of all things who alone truly is. "For," says he, "the being of all things is the Divinity Who is above being" [*Esse enim, inquit, omnium est super esse diuinitas*]. (*PP.* I.443b)

Eriugena had access to a fragment of Plato's *Timaeus* in Calcidius' translation, along with the latter's commentary, and the pseudo-Aristotelian *Categoriae decem* which we have already mentioned above. At one point in the dialogue *Periphyseon*, he refers to Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* (Περὶ ἑρμηνείας/*Peri ermenias*, *PP* II.597b-c) on the distinction between possibility and impossibility:

> Again, that the possibles and impossibles are reckoned in the number of things none of those who practice philosophy aright will dispute, and they are said to be for no other rea son than that the possible can come into being in something even if they are not, while the impossibles are contained [*continentur*] within the virtue of their impossibility alone. For their being consists in the impossibility of their appearing in any intelligible or sensible thing. [...] But if anyone wishes to make a full study of these, let him read Aristotle περὶ ἑρμηνείας/*peri ermeneias*, that is *De Interpretatione*, in which the philosopher has devoted his discussion exclusively or mainly to them, that is, to the possibles and impossibles. (*PP.* II.597b c)

This is part of a larger argument that the "nature of things" (*natura rerum*) includes more than can be known either as substances or accidents (*PP*. II.597b).[14]

Eriugena's sources were almost exclusively Christian, e.g., Ambrose and Augustine, but also included (unusually for the time) the Eastern Greek Christian theologies of the Cappadocians, Dionysius, Maximus Confessor, and Epiphanius—some of whose works he personally translated from the original Greek. Eriugena struggled always to construct a consistent philosophical system out of these diverse sources, and operated a very broad version of the principle of charity—all interpretations which are consistent with the Divine Word are accepted, and there are innumerable such interpretations, as many as there are colors in a "peacock's tail" (*penna pavonis*, *PP* IV.749c):

> For the Holy Spirit Who is the infinite founder [*infinitus conditor*] of Holy Scripture in the minds of the prophets established therein infinite meanings [*infinitos intellectus*], and there fore no commentator's interpretation displaces another's, provided only that what each says is consistent with the Faith and with the Catholic creed, whether he receives it from another or finds it in himself, albeit enlightened by God [*a deo illuminatus*]. (*PP* III.690b c)

The Christian Neoplatonic tradition identifies the Neoplatonic One with the Creator. This One is infinite, timeless, and unchanging. Moreover, it cannot be properly spoken about or comprehended by the human mind. This infinite One is both transcendent above and immanent in creation, but the stress—in Eriugena and Dionysius—is on God as transcendent of all predication, *beyond* all that can be said of Him. As Eriugena puts it, God "surpasses all essence" (*superat omnem essentiam*), is infinite and cannot be defined (*PP* II.589a-b):

> Or how can the infinite be defined by itself in anything or be understood in anything when it knows itself to be above every finite [thing] and every infinite [thing] and beyond finitude and infinity. (*PP* II.589b)

Eriugena, moreover, is insistent that God cannot define Himself—it is not simply (as Alumnus suggests) that human beings are unable to define God because of their limitation. God cannot define God because that would limit *his* infinity: He would not be "universally infinite" (*universaliter infinitus*, *PP* II.587c) if he were "circumscribed" by a definition. To define is to delimit, to set limit, and

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14 Sheldon Williams in his edition references Boethius' *In lib. De interpretatione*, editio secun da, iii. 9, ed. Meiser, ii. Pp. 185 250. But it is not clear Eriugena had access to Boethius' text (which was in circulation at the time). Eriugena did have access to Maximus Confessor who had his own account of the Porphyrian descent from the highest genus to the lowest species.

there are no limits to God. God cannot define Himself, but that is not a weakness but a strength and testimony of his genuinely infinite status.

In contrast to the infinite Being of God, Eriugena follows Plato in thinking of the created cosmos (at least what he calls "the Created Effects") as belonging to the realm of time and becoming (*γένεσις*, *genesis*), of *mutabilitas*, neither wholly non-existent nor completely real, "not completely not being" (*nec omnino non esse*) in Augustine's terms.[15] This realm is entirely dependent on immaterial and eternal principles, namely the Primary Causes (*causae primordiales*) which themselves are the held in the *Verbum* or *Logos*.

In Eriugena's conception, furthermore, God, the cosmos, and human nature, are all —in some respect—infinite. God is infinite and manifests himself infinitely in his "theophaniae" (*θεοφάνιαι*), the Primary Causes (*causae primordiales*) of all things, which are the Ideas in the mind of God and are also infinite, as is the created cosmos (the Effects) before the Fall. Finally, human nature is essentially unbounded and infinite and would have been a perfect image of the divine. It gains corporeality and finitude only as a consequence of the Fall. Space and time, moreover (and this is the part of the restriction imposed by the Fall), are to be understood as "definitions" *in the mind* rather than as substantial entities in their own right. Heaven and hell, furthermore, are not places (*non in loco*) but are states of mind, *phantasiai*, *φαντασίαι* enjoyed or suffered by the saved or fallen souls or minds. The entire world then is a realm of appearances, of transitory images, whereas the true essence of all things is incorporeal, incorruptible, and ultimately resides in the divine. Eriugena then thinks of God as a transcendent non-being or hyper-being who is responsible for the appearing of all beings, but whose boundlessness means that God is an infinite and unnamable creative source. Indeed, in *Periphyseon* Book One, Eriugena characterizes God as "without beginning" (*sine principio*, I.451d), "the infinity of infinities" (*infinitas infinitorum*, I.517b), "the opposite of opposites and the contrariety of contraries" (*oppositorum oppositio, contrariorum contrarietas*, I.517c), a phrase that would influence Nicolas of Cusa's *coincidentia oppositorum*, and as "above all entities that are and are not" (*super omnia quae sunt et quae non sunt*, *PP*. II.598a).

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15 Augustine (1961), 147.

3 Eriugena's Reading of St. Augustine

For Eriugena, Augustine is the preeminent Latin authority, the most quoted author by far, and this is already evident in *De Praedestinatione*.[16] In that early work, *De Praedestinatione*, he refers to as many as 46 different works by Augustine, especially *De libero arbitrio* and *De civitate dei*. In his later writings, Eriugena utilises *De vera religion*, *De Trinitate*, and especially the long commentary on Genesis, *De Genesi ad Litteram*, which is an important source for Eriugena's anthropology. Overall his aim is to harmonize Dionysius with Augustine. He accepts Augustine on the tripartite nature of the soul. However, he opposes the reading of Augustine that says paradise is a physical reality and in *Periphyseon* Book Five disagrees with Augustine on the resurrection of the body.[17]

Shortly after writing the work on predestination Eriugena encountered the writings of Dionysius. These extraordinary mystical texts, written in a complex and difficult Greek that Eriugena eventually mastered and translated, albeit in the word-for-word style current at that time, led him to read Augustine in a new light, highlighting (as we saw that Jean-Luc Marion does) Augustine's commitment to the *via negativa:* that God is better known by not knowing, for his ignorance is true wisdom (*qui melius nesciendo scitur*, *cuius ignorantia vera est sapientia*, *PP* I.510b), which is a quote from Augustine's *De Ordine* XVI.44 (*Deus qui melius scitur nesciendo*).[18]

For both Augustine and Boethius, moreover, God is not captured truly by the category of substance. But Eriugena's reading of the categories is further informed by Maximus Confessor, who sees them as applying only to the created world. Eriugena is clear that whatever is substance is finite and subject to accidents, but that God has no accidents, and therefore, God is not a substance: "For that substance which has the first place among the categories is finite and subject to accidents, but that universal essence admits in itself no accident" (*PP* II.597a). God has no accidents. Thus, Eriugena can say in *Periphyseon* Book Two:

> The Divine Nature is without any place [*omne loco caret*], although it provides place within itself for all things which are from it, and for that reason it is called the place of things [*omnium locus*], but it is not able to provide place for itself because it is infinite and uncircumscribed [*infinita et incircunscripta*]. (*PP* II.592c)

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16 Madec (1988).
17 See McEvoy (1999), 315   16.
18 Augustine (1948), 438.

He similarly says that God is without "relation which is called by the Greeks πρός τι" (*PP* II.591c). Eriugena concludes that it is "superfluous" (*superfluum*) to discuss the categories individually:

> For God understands himself to be in no defined substance or quantity or quality or relation, to whom will it not be clearer than day that no position nor possession, place or time, action or passion at all is an accident in Him. (*PP* II.591d 592a)

According to Eriugena, God does not know what he is; he is not a "what" (*quid*, *PP* II.589c).

Eriugena was particularly impressed by Dionysius' *Celestial Hierarchy*, where, in Chapter Four (PG III.177d1–2) he read: τὸ γὰρ εἶναι πάντων ἐστιν ἡ ὑπὲρ τὸ εἶναι θεότης (*to gar einai panton estin he hyper to einai theotes)*, which he translates, *Esse enim omnium est super esse divinitas*, "the being of all things is the Divinity above being" (*PP* I.443b).[19] This is perhaps Eriugena's favourite phrase from Dionysius.[20] In the manuscripts, it is sometimes rendered, probably by a copyist without knowledge of the Greek original, as *esse enim omnium est super esse divinitatis*.[21] Sometimes, instead of invoking the Dionysian formula *super esse divinitas*, Eriugena speaks of the "divine superessentiality" (*divina superessentialitas*, *PP* III.634b), or—quoting Dionysius *Divine Names* I 1–2 (*PG* III.588b-c)—of the "superessential and hidden divinity" (*superessentialis et occulta divinitas*, *PP* I.510b).

What does it mean to say that the being of all things is the One who is "beyond being" or "beyond essence" (*superessentialis*)? In Book One of the *Periphyseon* Eriugena comments on the meaning of *superessentialis*:

> Nutritor: Did we not say that, strictly speaking, the ineffable nature [*ineffabilis natura*] can be signified by no verb, by no noun, and by no other audible sound, by no signified thing? And to this you agreed. For it is not properly but metaphorically [*Non enim proprie sed translatiue*] that it is called Essence, Truth, Wisdom and other names of this sort. Rather

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19 *PP* I.516c, III.644b, V.903c; *Patrologia Latina* CXXII.1046b c. See also Eriugena, *Expositiones in Ierarchiam Coelestem* PL CXXII.169a, CCCM31.

20 Maximus Confessor also comments on Dionysius' phrase in I *Ambigua* xiii, *Patrologia Graeca* XCI 1225D, a passage well known to Eriugena as he translated the *Ambigua*.

21 See Eriugena (1969), 323 326. The Greek definite article ἡ (*he*) before θεότης (*theotes*) cannot be rendered in Latin. In *Expositiones* Eriugena gives another version: *esse omnium est divinitas quae plus est quam esse*. Elsewhere he renders ἡ ὑπὲρ τὸ εἶναι θεότης (*he hyper to einai theotes*) as *superessentialis divinitas* (Hom. 289b): *esse omnium est superessentialis divinitas*. *Superessentialis* is, of course, the translation for Dionysius' ὑπερουσιώδης (*hyperousiodes*). These various renderings have led Dondaine to remark on the care Eriugena took to improve his translations to get the exact import of Dionysius' theology.

it is called superessential [*superessentialis*], more than truth, more than wisdom. But do not even these [names] seem to be, in a way, proper names [*propria nomina*]? For it is not called Essence properly, yet it is properly called superessential; similarly, if it is not called Truth or Wisdom properly, yet it is properly called more than truth and more than wisdom. For al though among the Latins these names are not usually pronounced under a single accent [*sub uno accentu*] or by a unitary harmony of composition, except the name *superessentia lis*, by the Greeks, on the other hand, each is expressed by a single compound. (*PP* I.460c 461a)

Eriugena regards apparently affirmative designations such as *superessentialis* as actually belonging to negative theology. As Alumnus comes to realise:

For when it is said: It is superessential, this can be understood by me as nothing else but a negation of essence [*negatio essentiae*]. For he who says 'It is superessential,' openly denies [*aperte negat*] that it is essential, and therefore although the negative is not expressed in the words pronounced, yet the hidden meaning of it is not hidden from those who consider them well. (*PP* I.462a b)

For Eriugena, terms like *superessentialis* compound the two kinds of theology—positive and negative—since they outwardly appear positive, but their meaning has the "force of the negative" (*virtus abdicativae*, *PP* I.462c). These terms encapsulate the dialectic of seeming to affirm and at the same time denying, and hence participate in the dialectics of knowledge and ignorance. The main point is that God is not to be understood solely affirmatively as "being" or "essence" (*essentia*) but as "more than *essentia*" or "beyond essence."

As Eriugena himself argues, both Augustine and Boethius also state that the Aristotelian categories do not apply *proprie* to God. Moreover, Aristotle—"the shrewdest of the Greeks"—considered the categories not to apply to God but only to the *created* universe:

Aristotle the shrewdest of the Greeks, as they say, in discovering the way of distinguishing natural things [*naturalium rerum*] included the innumerable variety of all things which come after God and are created by Him in ten universal genera which he called the ten cat egories, that is predicables. For as he holds, nothing can be found in the multitude of cre ated things and in the various motions of minds which cannot be included in one of these genera. (*PP* I.463a)

In support of the view that the category of substance does not apply to God, Eriugena cites Augustine *De Trinitate* (5.1.2), that the categories of created things are not relevant to the divine essence.

Eriugena reads Aristotle through the eyes of Augustine. God is not *ousia*, but more than *ousia* and the cause of all *ousiai* (*PP* I.464a). The categories are not

predicated *proprie* but *metaphorice* of God. Yet, in Book Five of *De Trinitate*, Augustine had written:

> There is at least no doubt that God is substance, or perhaps a better word would be essence [*substantia, vel, si melius appelatur, essentia*]; at any rate what the Greeks call οὐσία [...] And who can more be than he that said to his servant I am who am (Ex. 3:14). (*De Trinitate* V.1.3)[22]

Boethius in his *De Trinitate* IV (a text with which Eriugena was also familiar) was more explicit that God is not substance in the normal sense of the categories:

> There are in all ten categories which can be universally predicated of all things, namely, substance, quality, quantity ... But when anyone turns these to predication of God, all the things that can be predicated [*quae praedicari*] are changed ... For when we say 'God' [*deus*] we seem indeed to denote a substance; but it is such as is beyond substance [*quae sit ultra substantiam*]. (translation modified)[23]

Eriugena himself accepts the principle that a simple nature does not admit of the notion of substance and accidents (*PP* I.524a). God, then, is not *ousia*.

At the center of Eriugena's philosophy then is a conception of God as "beyond being," "beyond essence." He even goes further and understands God as "nothingness" (*nihilum*, *PP* III.685a) and as the negation of essence (*negatio essentiae*, *PP* I.462b). God is "not this nor that nor anything" (*nec hoc nec illud nec ullum ille est*, *PP* I.510c). This is inspired by Dionysius. The closing lines of the *Mystical Theology* are among the most radical in Christian theology. God is beyond every affirmation and negation: "We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things" (Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, 1048 A). Eriugena adopts this view of God as utterly transcendent, beyond speech and mind. God is a transcendent nothingness, *nihil per excellentiam*, as opposed to a "nothingness through privation," *nihil per privationem,* which characterizes *materia prima*. Eriugena writes of Dionysius (having quoted from the *Divine Names*):

> Notice how the theologian [Dionysius] has no hesitation in ascribing the name Nothing [*nihilum*] to the Supreme Light, or God, Which lightens every intelligible and rational creature. And he gives his reason for doing so: 'Because It is superessentially exalted above all things that are.' (*PP* V.898C)

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22 Augustine (1991), 190. Translation modified.
23 Boethius (1918), 16 18. Translation modified.

Moreover, this "non-being" is the being of all created things. The divine first principle is best understood as a nothingness, which through an act of self-negation brings itself into being. *Ex nihilo* creation, Eriugena explains, really means *ex deo*.

4 Eriugena on Time and Creation

In *Periphyseon* Book Two (and again in Book Five) Eriugena has a mini-treatise on why the categories do not determine God and also why they apply not to physical extended matter but rather to the immaterial domain. These categories are actually attributes that "circle around" οὐσία. Quantity, quality, space, and time have a particular relevance for Eriugena. For Eriugena's cosmic descent, time and space play a crucial part in the dynamics of the divine self-articulation in its *exitus* and recollection in its *reditus*. As Marta Cristiani has emphasized in her study of time and space in Eriugena, Eriugena follows Maximus in emphasizing the positive aspects of creation as the concrete manifestation of the divine.[24] Eriugena writes: "For place and time are counted among all the things that have been created" (*Locus siquidem et tempus inter omnia quae creata sunt computantur*, *PP* I.468c).

Eriugena takes from Augustine and Maximus the idea that the categories (which contain the spatiotemporal world) are themselves created by God. For Augustine, time commences with the creation of the world; there was no time before it. Being a creature and being temporal are one and the same.[25] Presumably the same is true of space (although he does not discuss it explicitly).

Eriugena remains squarely within the common Christian-Stoic-Platonist tradition, which holds that the whole created domain falls under the spell of time and hence of mutability (*mutabilitas*) and corruptibility. According to Augustine, where there is time there is mutability (*De musica* VI.11.29). Time as mutability is essentially connected with finitude and death, with semblance, deception, and the shadowy realm of φαντασία, *phantasia*. In fact, the very τέλος, *telos*, of temporal life is death, θάνατος, *thanatos*; the inner core of sensuous life is death.

Time, as Augustine had shown with his famous *distentio animi* conjecture in *Confessiones* XI, inevitably involves stretching, dispersion, and disintegration, and therefore is the opposite of the kind of integration and attention (*attentio*, *intentio*) sought for by the contemplative mind. Eriugena also speaks of the *dis-*

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24 Cristiani (1973), 47.

25 See Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* V.12.

tentio of times and places, understood as some kind of scattering from the Primal Causes. On the other hand, for him, the essence of human life in its perfection is to be timeless, and, in that sense, to be a true image and likeness of the divine. So the distracting temporal *φαντασίαι, phantasiae,* must be transformed into timeless *θεοφάνιαι, theophaniae,* of the divine.

Eriugena seems to be familiar—at least in broad outline and without attribution—with Aristotle's definition of time in the *Physics* as the measure of motion in respect of "before" and "after." In *Periphyseon* Book Five he writes:

> For when there is no motion [*motus*] to be measured by or divided into temporal intervals, how can there be any time? For time is the exact and natural measure of movements and pauses [*Est enim tempus morarum vel motuum certa et naturalis dimensio*]. So when the measurable thing passes, the measure must pass also: in what does time consist when mo tion ceases to be observed? (*PP* V.890a)

Of course, Eriugena was familiar with Augustine's *Confessiones* Bk XI.24, where Augustine rejects the view that time is constituted by the movement of a material body. For bodies move in time and it is in time that we measure their movement. Time then, cannot itself be the measure of movement. The same body can move at different speeds, and hence the measure of the movement cannot be the same as time.

For Eriugena, God creates or manifests Himself in the creature, expressing His own inexpressible nature. Eriugena introduces *theophania,* "what the Greeks call Θεοφάνια" (*PP* I.446d), which he explains as a "divine manifestation" (*dei apparitio*). Thus, in a justly famous passage in *Periphyseon* Book Three, Eriugena, in the voice of Nutritor, attests that God and nature are *unum et id ipsum* and that there is a dynamic *exitus* or "ineffable descent" (*ineffabilis condescensio*, *PP* III.678d), whereby God moves from invisible to visible and from the supratemporal to the temporal:

> For both the creature by subsisting is in God; and God, by manifesting Himself [*se ipsum manifestans*], in a marvellous and ineffable manner creates Himself in the creature, the in visible making himself visible and the incomprehensible comprehensible, and the hidden revealed and the unknown known [...] and the infinite finite [*infinitus finitum*] and the un circumscribed circumscribed and the supratemporal temporal [*supertemporalis tempora lem*] and the Creator of all things created in all things. (*PP* III.678c)

God, then, is supratemporal but makes Himself temporal. Temporality, then, while alien to, or other than the divine nature in itself, becomes the very expression of this timeless nature.

Eriugena stresses that this entrance of the divine into time is not to be thought simply as the Incarnation (*incarnatio et inhumanatio verbi*, *PP*

III.678d) whereby God is made flesh, but as the original *exitus* or "ineffable condescension" (*ineffabilis condescensio*) of the divine nature, whereby "It Moves from Its Causes into Its Effects." So in this sense, some version of temporal becoming or succession belongs to the very essence of the divine as Creator. But the kind of succession that belongs to the divine cannot have anything to do with decay or mutability, but has an order and measure given by God, who makes all things according to measure, number, and weight. The Primary Causes in God allow both for the infinite and for some kind of multiplication and succession according to divine plan.

Among the Primary Causes, Eriugena even lists "magnitude in itself" (*per se ipsam magnitudo*) and "eternity in itself" (*per se ipsam aeternitas, PP* II.616c). Furthermore, the "causes of all places and times" (*causae locorum et temporum*) are in the Primary Causes (*PP* II.547c). Both eternity and time, then, issue forth from the divine through the Primary Causes into the Effects. There is even a suggestion that Eriugena considers there to be a primary cause of time—just as there is of evil (*primordialis causa totius malitiae, PP* IV.848c), placing him within the sphere of late Neoplatonism which maintained a Platonic form of time.

Following Maximus, Eriugena holds that our return to the primordial causes consists of bringing body back to mind and of overcoming the dimensions of space and time. The Resurrection involves an overcoming of the spatial and temporal. Furthermore, Christ's Ascension is also proof that the humanity of the Second Person of the Trinity cast off all spatial and temporal characteristics and returned to its timeless and eternal and wholly spiritual nature. Indeed, for Eriugena, in theological terms, the humanity of the Second Person of the Trinity cannot be located in any place or time:

> Do not imagine that the Humanity of Christ which after the resurrection was transformed into his Divinity [is] in place. The Divinity of Christ is not in place [*Diuinitas Christi in loco non est*]: so neither is His Humanity. Be sure that it is the same with time [*Eodem modo sane intelligi de tempore*], with quality, with quantity, with circumscribed form. (*PP* II.539c)

In *Periphyseon* Book Five Eriugena insists with Maximus that the return involves a falling away of everything local and temporal, including any such aspects of Christ, all of which are transformed into timeless spirit (*PP* V.993b).

Eriugena understands the procession or outgoing of God into creation in terms of the movement from the highest genus to the lowest species and individuals (he calls them "*atoma*"). In *Periphyseon* IV.748c, Eriugena says that God creates everything according to genera and species. Dialectic (division) is tracking the way nature itself unfolds. Porphyry first divides *ousia* into 'corporeal' and incorporeal and Eriugena's division of nature also proceeds from a most general

essence into the various modes of division to arrive ultimately at the fourfold division of "Nature." Everything flows from God as divine essence and is absorbed back into Him in a dialectical process of *exitus* and *reditus*. But, ultimately, Eriugena says, "God shall be all in all (*omnia in omnibus*)."

5 Nicholas of Cusa's *De Docta Ignorantia* (1440)

Let us make a bold leap forward to the fifteenth century when there is an anti-Aristotelian backlash that will continue into Descartes and modernity. The Neo-platonic suspicion of Aristotle continued on in the Middle Ages (especially in reaction to the Thirteenth-Century revival of Aristotle) where even Thomas Aquinas could be seen as a "radical Aristotelian." Meister Eckhart admired Aristotle as the greatest scientist of nature, but on the other hand he believed that Aristotle failed to grasp the nature of the One. God cannot truly be called Being because being implies limitation.[26] God is not a "what," a *quidditas*.

Nicholas of Cusa (Niklas Krebs or "Cusanus"), one of the most original and creative intellects of the fifteenth-century,[27] has been variously described as "the last great philosopher of the dying Middle Ages,"[28] as a "transition-thinker" between the medieval and modern worlds,[29] and as the "gatekeeper of the modern age."[30] He is a lone figure with no real success, although he had some influence on Copernicus, Kepler, Bruno, and, tangentially, on Descartes who refers to his characterization of the universe as a "contracted infinite" or as "indefinite." Descartes writes:

> In the first place I recollect that the Cardinal of Cusa and many other doctors have sup posed the world to be infinite without ever being censured by the Church; on the contrary,

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26 Mojsisch (2001), 140.

27 Cusanus' complete works were first published in Strasbourg in 1488, now reprinted by Paul Wilpert as *Nikolaus von Kues. Werke* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1967). A second edition was produced in Milan in 1502 and Lefèvre D'Étaples (Faber Stapulensis) produced his 3 volume edition, which included *De concordantia Catholica* and some sermons, in Paris in 1514. The Heidelberg Academy has been preparing a complete critical edition of his works since 1932 (Leipzig/Hamburg, Felix Meiner). It was begun on the instigation of Cassirer and Rickert under the direction of Ernst Hoff man and Raymond Klibansky. Over 20 volumes have now been published, including several vol umes of sermons (he wrote over 300 sermons in all). The *Acta Cusana* series also publishes source material on his life. There is an active Cusanus Gesellschaft in Germany and an American Cusanus Society which produces an informative Newsletter.

28 Koyré (1957), 6.

29 Copleston (1953), 231.

30 Haubst (1988), 6.

to represent God's works as very great is thought to be a way of doing him honor. And my opinion is not so difficult to accept as theirs, because I do not say that the world is infinite but only that it is indefinite. There is quite a notable difference between the two: for we cannot say that something is infinite without a reason to prove this such as we can give only in the case of God; but we can say that a thing is indefinite simply if we have no reason to prove that the thing has bounds. (Letter to Chanut, 6 June 1647)[31]

Besides this influence on Descartes, it is now thought likely that Cusanus had a subterranean influence on Spinoza and Leibniz. Some of Cusanus' formulations ("God is actually all that He can be" or "God is actually every possibility," *ut sit actu omne id quod possible est*, *De docta ignorantia* I.5.14) anticipate Spinoza's concept of a God as the actualisation of all possibilities.[32] Cusanus' "all things exist in the best way they are able to exist" (*omnia sunt eo meliori modo quo esse possunt*, *DDI* I.5.13) may be compared with Leibniz's best of all possible worlds.[33]

Cusanus was a Humanist scholar, Church reformer (his *De concordantia Catholica* of 1434 included proposals for the reform of Church and state), papal diplomat, and Catholic Cardinal. In the course of his life he attempted to reconcile Papal and Conciliar, Greek Eastern and Latin Western Christianity, Muslim and Christian, and traditional theology and emerging mathematical science. In many ways, he is a Renaissance figure. An exact contemporary of Gutenberg, he is credited with introducing printing into Italy.[34] An eager collector of manuscripts,[35] he eventually owned some 300 manuscripts, including Latin translations of Plato's *Phaedo*, *Crito*, *Apology*, *Seventh Letter*, *Republic*, *Laws*, *Phaedrus*, and *Parmenides*. He owned Moerbeke's translation of Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, Proclus' *Commentary on the Parmenides*, and Petrus Balbus's translation of the *Platonic Theology* (*Codex Cus.* 185). He had copies of part of Eriugena's *Periphyseon*, Hugh of St. Victor's *Didascalikon*, and several works by Eckhart. Cusanus cites Dionysius from his earliest to his last works (e.g., *De li non aliud*), although he later said that at the time of writing *De docta ignorantia*

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31 Descartes (1996), 52.

32 See Copenhaver/Schmitt (1992), 184.

33 See Zimmermann (1852), 306 328.

34 In 1469 the Italian Giovanni Andrea de' Bussi (1417 1475), personal secretary to Cusanus from 1458 to 1464, eulogised him in the Preface to his edition of the first volume of Jerome, call ing Cusanus the most learned of men and referring specifically to his interest in the recently in vented sacred art of printing. (It has been suggested that Cusanus was responsible for introduc ing art of printing into Italy from Germany).

35 In 1429 he even discovered a manuscript containing twelve previously unknown plays of Plautus.

(1440), he had not yet read Dionysius (*Apologia* 12).[36] He characterises his Platonism as stemming from Dionysius, but he also draws on Dionysius' Latin translators and commentators, including Eriugena (whom he calls "Johannes Scotigena"),[37] Albertus Magnus' *Commentary on the Divine Names*,[38] Robert Grosseteste (whose translations of Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* and *Celestial Hierarchy* he owned in manuscript), Thomas Gallus, and Meister Eckhart.

Cusanus wrote an informed treatise, *De correctione calendarii*, on the reform of the calendar. His astronomical instruments are still preserved in the library at Kues. He has earned a place in the history of mathematics for his attempts to "square the circle." His *De docta ignorantia* (1440)[39] already offers criticisms of the Ptolemaic universe, and postulates that the earth is in movement and that the universe has no fixed center.

In fact, the phrase "*docta ignorantia*" appears first in Augustine, *Epistola 130*, PL XXXIII.505 (as Cusanus knows), 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.*" As we saw, 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, but Cusanus greatly develops the historical lineage of this "learned ignorance" tradition to include all great philosophers—including (somewhat in spite of himself) Aristotle! By temperament Cusanus is always Platonist and even Pythagorean. He speaks of the "divine Plato" (*DDI* I.17.48; *Apologia* 10.25). Pythagoras is "the first philosopher both in name and in fact" (*DDI* I.11.32). The Platonists spoke "sensibly" about the Forms (*DDI* II.9.148); the *Parmenides* opened a "way to God."

Cusanus also regards Aristotle as "very profound" (*DDI* I.1.4) and the sharpest of minds, and to have been right to say that the entire created world divides up into substance and accident (*DDI* I.18.53), but he also thinks of him as rather puffed up, wanting to show his greatness by refuting others (*DDI* I.11.32). The Ar-

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36 Hopkins (1988), 50. Dionyius is cited several times in the *Apologia*. Cusanus, in fact, refers to Dionyius twice in his *De Concordantia Catholica* of 1433, but these references might have been drawn from other sources.

37 See Beierwaltes (1994) 266 312. Besides Eriugena's translations of Dionysius, Cusanus, at the very least, was familiar with *Periphyseon* Book I, which he owned in manuscript (British Museum Codex Additivus 11035) and annotated, as well as the *Clavis Physicae* of Honorius Augustodunensis (Paris Bib. Nat. cod. lat. 6734), a compendium of Eriugenian excerpts, and the homily *Vox Spiritualis* (under the name of Origen).

38 Albertus Magnus (1972).

39 Cusa (1985). (Henceforth, *DDI*.)

istotelian Johannes Wenck von Herrenberg (c.1390–1460), a theologian from Heidelberg, accused him of pantheism,[40] and claimed Cusanus "cares little for the sayings of Aristotle" (*De ignota litteratura*, 22).[41] In his reply to Wenck, Cusanus himself regrets that the Aristotelian sect now prevails (*Apologia* 6)[42] and thinks Aristotle was overly preoccupied with logic, rhetoric, and seeking definitions.

Cusanus is preoccupied by a single problem that runs through all his works: how can we, as finite created beings, think about the infinite and transcendent God? From the outset Cusanus was focused on the difficulty of a finite mind gaining knowledge of the infinite God. An early sermon, *In principio erat Verbum* (1438), already recognises the immensity, unnamability, and unknowability of the divine (*Sermon I*).[43] His first short dialogue between a pagan and a Christian, *De Deo abscondito* (1444/5), opens with the question: how does one seriously adore what one does not know?[44] For Cusanus, as he says in *De docta ignorantia*, God is "infinite oneness" (*unitas infinita*, DDI I.5.14). God is "absolute infinity" (*infinitas absoluta*, *De visione dei* 13), which is reminiscent of Eriugena's "universally infinite." He writes in *De docta ignorantia*: "Now according to the theology of negation, there is not found in God anything other than infinity" (*Et non reperitur in deo secundum theologiam negationis aliud quam infinitas*, I.26.88).

Cusanus begins from what he takes to be the "self-evident" proposition that there is no proportion between finite and infinite (*DDI* I.3.9). Our rational knowl-

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40 Born in Herrenberg, Germany, around 1390, Johannes Wenck received his Master of Arts from the University of Paris in 1414, and then attended the University of Heidelberg, where he began teaching in 1426, receiving his licence in theology in 1432. He was elected Rector of the University of Heidelberg on three separate occasions (in 1435, 1444, and 1451). He sided with Pope Eugene IV and the Conciliar movement at Council of Basel, and therefore on the opposite side from Nicholas, 'the condemned cause of the men of Basel' as Cusanus characterises it in the *Apologia* 5:11 12. Wenck had a considerable philosophical output. Among his writings are a *Parva logica lia* (before 1426), *De imagine et similitudine contra eghardicos* (1430); *Das Buchlein von der Seele* (1436) edited G. Steer (Munich: Fink, 1967), *Commentary on Boethius' de Hebdomadibus*, *Commentary on Aristotle's De anima III*, commentary on the *Liber de causis*. He also wrote a commentary of Pseudo Dionysius' *Celestial Hierarchy* (1455). Wenck wrote better in German, and Latin is relatively unsophisticated compared with Cusanus, whose style Wenck characterises as 'sufficiently elegant' (*De Ignota* 19). After Cusanus' reply, Wenck wrote his own further riposte, *De facie scolae doctae ignorantiae* (1449 55). There is a reference to this work in the Vatican Library, but no manuscript has been found. We have then only an incomplete record of this dispute.
41 Hopkins (1988), 23.
42 Hopkins (1988), 46.
43 Cusa (1970), 3. See Flasch (1998), 21 26.
44 Cusa, *Opuscula I: De Deo Abscondito, De Quaerendo Deum* [et alia]. Nicholas of Cusa (1994), 131 137.

edge progresses by degrees, ratios, and proportions, and can get infinitely more precise without coinciding exactly with its object. The infinite is precisely that which cannot be measured and which therefore cannot be an object of the mind as measurer.[45] In *De coniecturis* I.8.35, he writes: "Reason analyzes all things in terms of multitude and magnitude." Every inquiry makes use of comparison and relation (*proportio*), but *proportio* indicates agreement in one respect, otherness in other respects (*DDI* 1.1.3). Number is needed to understand *proportio*, even though the precise relations between corporeal things surpass human understanding. Reason is beset by "otherness"; only intellect employed in a certain way can gain oneness through a certain kind of self-negation and self-transcendence. All the great sages since Socrates have known this truth. Cusanus frequently invokes the claim (found in Plato's *Theaetetus* and Aristotle's *Metaphysics*) that philosophy begins in wonder or amazement (*admiratio*).[46] All humans desire to know, but exact knowledge is impossible, "precise truth inapprehensible" (*DDI* I.2.8). Truth can only be grasped with a degree of "otherness" (*De coniecturis* II.6.101). He declares—in sympathy with Socrates—that in a certain sense "to know is to be ignorant" (*scire est ignorare*, *DDI* I.2). His starting point is self-aware ignorance: "the more he knows that he is unknowing, the more learned he will be" (*DDI* I.1.4). He proposes a new "science of ignorance" (*scientia ignorantiae*, *Idiota de sapientiae*, or *doctrina ignorantiae*, *DDI* II. *Prol*) or "sacred ignorance" (*sacra ignorantia*, *DDI* I.26.87; also *Apologia*).

Reason (*ratio*) must be supplemented by a kind of intellectual unknowing, a knowing that recognises its own limitations in the sphere of the transcendent and infinite. The arrogant kind of knowing used in disputation and dialectic (which he associates with the Aristotelian Schoolmen—including his nemesis, the Heidelberg Aristotelian theologian Johannes Wenck) must be contrasted with "learned ignorance" (*docta ignorantia*). Cusanus' aim is always to show the finitude of human knowledge and to instruct us in our ignorance. This is the "instruction of ignorance" (*doctrina ignorantiae*, *DDI* II *Prol*. 90), the prelude to the Cartesian focus on the capacity of the human mind to obtain true knowledge.

Learned ignorance is not a kind of discursive reasoning, which even hunting dogs have, but rather is a kind of seeing with intellect (*intellectuabilitas*, *Apologia* 14)[47] which "transcends the power of reason" (*De beryllo* 1). Reason (which Cusanus associates very closely with mathematics) is bound to the principle of con-

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45 Cusanus borrows from Aquinas ST I.11.2 the false etymology of *mens* as related to *mensura*.
46 See Cusanus, *Idiota de mente*. 1.1, p. 41. For the claim that philosophy begins in wonder, see Plato, *Theaetetus* 155d and Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.2.982b. See also Cusanus, *De coniecturis* II.11.
47 Hopkins (1988), 51.

tradiction, and false reason results in the "coincidence of opposites" that is anathema to it *qua* reason (*De coniecturis* II.1.76). But there is a higher understanding that can employ contradictions in order to go beyond them.

For Cusanus, following in the tradition of Augustine and Eriugena, God is not strictly speaking substance (because some accident is essential for a substance). Nevertheless, God can be described as the *quidditas absoluta mundi* (*DDN* II.iii.116). 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. God is the "cause of all things," the "being of beings" (*entitas rerum*, *DDI* I.8.22) or "being of all being" (*entitas omnis esse*, *DDI* I.23.73), and the "form of forms" (*forma formarum*, *DDI* II.2.103).[48] In Eckhartian fashion, he then denies that God is "this or that." God is not so much being or a substance as, following Dionysius, "more than substance" (*DDI* I.18.52). Following Eriugena, Cusanus calls God "*nihil omnium*" (*DDI* I.16.43), who is also "*omnia simul*" (*DDI* III.3.197).

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, of opposites, as well as of contradictories. In *De uisione Dei* (xiii.55) he says that coincidence is contradiction without contradiction (*contradictio sine contradictione*). Strictly speaking, there is no concept of the coincidence of opposites either in Dionysius or in Eriugena. Eriugena does talk about God as the *oppositio oppositorum* (I.517c) or as an *armonia* of opposites, but not as a *coincidentia*. Cusanus makes use of the concept of an *oppositio oppositorum sine opposition*.

Nicolas of Cusa always tries to implicate Aristotle as supporting his own Neoplatonic interpretations, although he sometimes takes some backhanded swipes at Aristotle. Thus, in *De Docta Ignorantia*, he argues that all ancient philosophers (he begins with Pythagoras and Plato and goes on to reference Augustine and Boethius) had recourse to mathematics when they wanted to develop some point:

> And none of the ancients who are esteemed as great approached difficult matters by any other likeness than mathematics. [...] How was Aristotle (who by refuting his predecessors wanted to appear as someone without parallel) able in the *Metaphysics* [*Metaphysics* VIII,3 (1044a l0 11)] to teach us about the difference of species otherwise than by comparing the species to numbers? And when, regarding natural forms, he wanted to teach how the one

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48 Also found in Thierry of Chartres' *Lectiones* II.38.

form is in the other, he resorted of necessity to mathematical forms, saying: "Just as a tri angle is in a quadrangle, so the lower [form] is in the higher [form]" [*De Anima* II, 3 (414b29.1 32)]. (*DDI* 1.11.32)[49]

Aristotle is cited by name just three times in *De Docta Ignorantia* and the refer ences are to the *Metaphysics* and *De anima*. Pursuing his mathematical analogy, Cusanus claims the finite is enfolded in the infinite:

> It follows, then, that an infinite line is the essence of a finite line. Similarly, the unqualifi edly Maximum is the Essence of all things. But the essence is the measure. Hence, Aristotle rightly says in the *Metaphysics* that the First is the measure [*metrum et mensura*] of all things because it is the Essence of all things. (*DDI* 1.17.47)[50]

He goes on to claim that Aristotle considers the straight line to be the measure of itself and of the crooked line (*DDI* I.18.52). He further claims:

> Moreover, through this [illustration] we see how it is that there can be only beings which participate in the being of the First either through themselves or through other than them selves just as there are only lines, either straight or curved. Wherefore, Aristotle was right in dividing all the things in the world into substance and accident. (*DDI* Bk 1.18.53)[51]

Nicolas of Cusa always regarded Aristotle as limited by his conception of the logic of contradiction. Thus, he writes in his late work *De Li Non Aliud*:

> NICHOLAS: I laud your remarks. And I add that also in another manner Aristotle closed off to himself a way for viewing the truth. For, as we mentioned earlier, he denied that there is a Substance of substance or a Beginning of beginning. Thus, he would also have denied that there is a Contradiction of contradiction. But had anyone asked him whether he saw contradiction in contradictories, he would have replied, truly, that he did. Suppose he were thereupon asked: "If that which you see in contradictories you see *antecedently* (just as you see a cause antecedently to its effect), then do you not see contradiction with out contradiction?" Assuredly, he could not have denied that this is so. For just as he saw that the contradiction in contradictories is contradiction of the contradictories, so prior to the contradictories he would have seen Contradiction before the expressed contradiction (even as the theologian Dionysius saw God to be, without opposition, the Oppositeness of opposites; for prior to [there being any] opposites it is not the case that anything is op posed to oppositeness). But even though the Philosopher failed in first philosophy, or men tal philosophy, nevertheless in rational and moral [philosophy] he wrote many things very

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49 Cusa (1985), 19.
50 Ibid. 27.
51 Ibid. 30.

worthy of complete praise. Since these things do not belong to the present speculation, let it suffice that we have made the preceding remarks about Aristotle.[52]

The term "opposite of opposites" of course is found in Eriugena's *Periphyseon*.

Cusanus thought that Aristotle contradicted himself in both denying that there could be an actual infinite quantity (*Metaphysics* 1066b) and at the same time as positing the First Mover as an infinite first cause (*De Li Non Aliud* 10). However, the actual text of Aristotle does not, in fact, make the First Mover infinite.

Aristotle would not allow for an "essence of an essence" for fear of an infinite regress. According to Cusanus, Aristotle did not reject an infinity that was "prior to quantity and prior to everything which is another and all in all" (*De Li Non Aliud* 10.40). This infinity—which is also the First Mover—is Cusanus' "Not Other."

> NICHOLAS: Aristotle rightly said that with respect to the mind's conceiving of quantity there cannot be a continuation unto infinity, and hence he rules out this infinity. But Aristotle did not refute an infinity which is such that it is prior to quantity and is prior to everything other and is all in all. Rather, he traced all things back to it   as being things from the First Mover, which he found to be of infinite power. He regarded all things as participating in this power   to which infinity I give the name "Not other" [*Non aliud*]. Hence, Not other is the Form of forms (or the Form of form), the Species of species, the Boundary of boundary, and likewise for all things. There is no further progression unto infinity, since we have already reached an Infinity which defines all things. (*De Li Non Aliud*, 10.40)

Chapter 18 of *Di Li Non Aliud* is a more detailed exploration of Aristotle, "the greatest and most acute Peripatetic." Cusanus goes on to say that if Aristotle had been more attentive to the "Not Other" he would not have needed such a complicated logic or "art of definition" (*De non aliud*, 19.86). Nicholas is concerned to show that Aristotle should have pressed his principle of non-contradiction further. He writes:

> The Philosopher held it to be most certain that an affirmation contradicts a negation and that both cannot at the same time be said of the same thing, since they are contradictories. He said this on the basis of reason's concluding it to be true. But if someone had asked Aristotle, "What is other?" he surely could have answered truly, "It is not other than other." And, if the questioner had thereupon added, "Why is other other?" Aristotle could rightly have answered as at first, "Because it is not other than other." And thus, he would have seen that Not other and other do not contradict each other as contradictories. And he would have seen that, that to which he gives the name "the first principle" [*primum prin*

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52 Cusa (1999), 89.

cipium] does not suffice for showing the way to the truth which the mind contemplates be
yond reasoning. (*De Li Non Aliud*, 19.88)

This is a standard, Proclean-inspired refutation of Aristotle's principle of contra-
diction as applying to everything. The principle of contradiction rules the realm
of finite being, but not the realm of the infinite divine which enfolds contradic-
tories as well as contraries and opposites. In itself, the Godhead is itself (*idip-
sum*); in the other, it is *not other* than the other ("*non aliud quam ipsum
aliud*"). This is a higher dialectic, which can make use of contradictories in
order to transcend them and to lead the finite mind to transcend itself.

Conclusion

Aristotle is a great authority (especially in logic) but he was too argumentative in
his approach (especially in relation to the views of his predecessors). Aristotle's
great contribution in logic is his recognition of the Principle of Non-Contradic-
tion, which is for him a foundational principle. However, Aristotle, while he un-
derstood the importance of understanding through reason and causes, lacked a
grasp of the divine nature as actually infinite. The understanding of an infinitely
actual being requires a new logic that transcends or overcomes the principle of
contradiction. Similarly, the categories, which require every substance to have an
accident, cannot apply to the divine realm since God has no accidents or rela-
tions. God then is not strictly *οὐσία, ousia,* but *ὑπερουσία, hyperousia*. His
being is best understood as non-being.

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