

**NICHOLAS OF CUSA:
METAPHYSICAL SPECULATIONS:
VOLUME TWO**

by
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PREFACE

With the English translation of the two Latin works contained in this present book, which is a sequel to *Nicholas of Cusa: Metaphysical Speculations: [Volume One]*,¹ I have now translated all² of the major treatises and dialogues of Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), except for *De Concordantia Catholica*.³ My plans call for collecting, in the near future, these translations into a two-volume paperback edition—i.e., into a Reader—that will serve, more generally, students of the history of philosophy and theology. Reasons of economy dictate that footnotes and introductory analyses be left aside, so that the prospective Reader cannot be thought of as a replacement for the more scholarly previously published volumes.

The present project was supported by a sabbatical leave granted by the University of Minnesota, with supplementary travel support from the University's Office of International Programs and from the McKnight Foundation by way of funds administered through the University of Minnesota. In the course of preparing this study I have examined, on site, the two extant Latin manuscripts of *De Ludo Globi*—one at the Cusanus Hospice in Bernkastel-Kues, Germany, the other at the Jagiellonian Library in Cracow, Poland. I wish to acknowledge the helpful reception accorded me at these two institutions by Frau Gabriele Neusius and Dr. Anna Kozłowska, respectively. Similarly, I am grateful for the kind reception by Professor Michela Pereira in the Philosophy Department of the University of Siena, Italy, where I spent a portion of my sabbatical leave. More locally, Alice Welch of the University of Minnesota's Department of Inter-Library Loans, Wilson Library, was of invaluable assistance in ordering with dispatch various scholarly works that I needed to use but that were unavailable here.

Over the years, I have been encouraged and inspired by Father F. S. Schmitt(†), of the Benedictine monastery at Bad Wimpfen, Germany, by Professors Rudolf Haubst(†), Klaus Kremer, and Klaus Reinhardt, all of the Institut für Cusanus-Forschung in Trier, Germany, by Professor Werner Beierwaltes, of the University of Munich, Professor Erich Meuthen, of the University of Cologne, Professor Giovanni Santinello, of the University of Padua, Italy, and Professor Jules Vuillemin, of the Collège de France, Paris. I have profited consider-

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ably from personal contacts with these eminent scholars and from pondering their penetrating scholarly publications.

In this present volume the Orienting Study is divided into two parts. The former part is intended for all students and scholars who are interested in Nicholas of Cusa's thought. The latter part is more technical and is meant only for those scholars who are directly working in the field of Cusan studies. In Part Two, I have often left untranslated into English the quotations that are in German; and sometimes I have also not translated the quotations that are in Latin. Moreover, I have taken exception, in great detail, with certain other scholars. Readers who are not interested in these specialized pathways may prefer to by-pass Part Two and may indeed do so without detriment to their understanding of *De Coniecturis* and *De Ludo Globi*. Let it be clear, however, that these two Cusan works cannot be appreciated if they are merely *read*; for they must be *studied*, being works of serious difficulty—*De Coniecturis* being the more profound of the two.

The Appendix contains bibliographical entries that update my previous bibliographies. These other bibliographies may be consulted for listings of literature that bear specifically upon the two Latin works herein translated.⁴ Moreover, I have incorporated into this volume one hundred pages of notes. These serve in an essential way not only to clarify various lines of reasoning but also to provide references for those who may wish to pursue the reasoning more extensively. They also furnish corroborative documentation.

Although my extended Cusan translation-project (first begun in 1976) has not included translating Nicholas's sermons, these sermons are of enormous significance for understanding Nicholas's thought, so that students of his thought will most certainly have to take account of them, as I too have had to take account of them in the subsequent "Orienting Study." In general the sermons are written in a more simplified and more readable Latin than are the treatises and the dialogues. And, in general, Nicholas preached his sermons in German, although he wrote them out in Latin for the sake of posterity. Critical editions of them continue to be prepared by the Institut für Cusanus-Forschung and continue to be published (under the auspices of the Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften) by Felix Meiner Verlag in Hamburg. Excerpts from Nicholas's sermons are also to be found

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in Volume II of the Paris edition (1514), entitled *Nicolai Cusae Cardinalis Opera*, reprinted by Minerva Verlag (Frankfurt am Main, 1962).

I will now permit myself, in a concluding retrospective on my *vita academica*, to make the following reflective observations. In addition to the many individuals who have facilitated my projects, and whom I have previously acknowledged in other of my works,⁵ I must now include mention of the five successive chairmen of the Minnesota Philosophy Department: Professors May Brodbeck(†), Homer E. Mason, William H. Hanson, Marcia M. Eaton, and Douglas E. Lewis. Each of these philosophers has shown a supportive appreciation of the history of philosophy—something that one does not always find nowadays in departments of philosophy across America. To each of them, eminent in his own respective specialty, I am deeply and lastingly indebted and grateful.

In the course of my academic pilgrimage there have also been some disappointments. I still grieve over the fact that the editors at the University of Minnesota Press forced me to eliminate from the manuscript of my *Companion to the Study of St. Anselm* most of the Latin passages (even though they were translated), in order that the book, as they said, should be pitched at the level of college freshmen (whom I had not targeted as the primary audience of the book). Young authors, at the beginning of their careers, have almost no leverage over editors, so that they must accept editors' imperious decisions, on pain of not having their work published at all. However that episode left me with a certain diminished confidence in university presses and in many of their self-proclaimed "academic" editors. I was therefore actually glad when F. Courtney wrote in his review [*The Heythrop Journal* (April 1974), 218]: "There is a little Latin here and there in this book; but I should judge hardly enough for more advanced students. There are places where supporting texts in Latin would be a real help in checking the interpretation of the author; and their absence is an inconvenience when a critical text is not to hand."

At the end of my career I have likewise felt abused by imperious editors—this time by those working on the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Without my consent, or even my knowledge, they added to my submissions on Anselm of Canterbury and Nicholas of Cusa certain erroneous characterizations of these two historical figures' in-

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dividual works (in parentheses in the bibliographies). Not only were some of these characterizations inaccurate but they were inaccurate in foolish ways. Unfortunately, readers will assume that I myself appended these unfitting descriptions. The erroneousness needs to be corrected in a future edition, as do also other failings throughout the (more or less) estimable Routledge volumes.

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ORIENTING STUDY

PART ONE: EXPOSITORY PURVIEW

1. *Cusanus as Original Metaphysician: initial assessment.*

1.1 “The greatness of Cusanus,” wrote Karl Jaspers, “lies in his metaphysics.” Indeed, Cusanus is of major importance, continues Jaspers, “only through his metaphysics In the chain of great metaphysicians he is an irreplaceable link. He constructed in a symbolic way his own great conception-of-being, which has lasting importance even without its Christian garb.”¹ Jaspers rightly recognizes Nicholas’s originality and essentiality within the history of metaphysics. And if the characterization of Nicholas as a thinker significantly important *only* as a metaphysician is indefensible (as surely it is), nonetheless the overstatement serves to remind us that Cusa was *primarily* a metaphysician—a theologically oriented metaphysician, to be sure.² Accordingly, then, as Rudolf Haubst adds, “the principle Cusan themes of the coincidence of opposites and of learned ignorance become unfolded from the philosophical *into the theological*. Nicholas draws these themes partly from sense-experience, partly from critical reflection. But from these sources the themes lead [us]—by means of an astounding power-of-attraction—unto the utmost attainable depths of the theological understanding of faith.”³ Haubst describes in Nicholas’s thought a coincidence of philosophical belief and religious faith,⁴ so that, for example, as Ernst Cassirer earlier had pointed out, the third book of *De Docta Ignorantia*, with its idea of Christ, is not some arbitrary “theological” appendix but is the embodiment and fulfillment of the inner dynamic of Cusan thought.⁵

Charles Lohr, while cognizant of the theological aspects of Nicholas’s thought, highlights that thought’s more philosophical moments:

Nicholas’ metaphysics is an achievement of great originality. His synthesis represents a high-water mark in the evolution of the new understanding of reality which had appeared in Western Europe about the beginning of the twelfth-century Renaissance. He brought together [1] Anselm’s ontological approach to the problem of the knowledge of God, [2] the Chartrain dialectic of unity, equality and connection, [3] Lull’s dynamic conception of being, [4] the Renaissance vision of man’s dignity and ... [5] the late medieval theories of degrees of perfection which were developed at Paris, Oxford and Padua.⁶

Nicholas himself professed awareness of the novelty of some of his ideas. In the prologue to *De Docta Ignorantia* he intimates that that work contains what is *rara*, i.e., what is unusual. And in *De Docta Ignorantia* II, 11 (156:3-4) he calls certain of his themes “*prius inaudita*,” or “previously unheard of.”⁷ Likewise, in his dedicatory letter to Cardinal Julian Cesarini he writes of Book Two of *De Docta Ignorantia* that it “elicits a few [teachings] about the universe—[teachings which go] beyond the usual approach of the philosophers and [which will seem] unusual to many.”⁸ Similarly, in the preamble to *De Coniecturis* he alludes to his approach as a “new method in the investigative arts” (“*haec nova indagandarum artium formula*”);⁹ and in the prologue to Book One of *De Coniecturis* he labels as “new thoughts” (“*adinventiones*”) the surmises that that treatise contains.¹⁰

1.2. Recently, Maarten Hoenen has challenged the originality of certain parts of Nicholas’s *De Docta Ignorantia* (completed in 1440) by claiming that Chapters 7-10 of Book Two, along with certain other passages, were plagiarized by Nicholas from an anonymous tractate (*Fundamentum Naturae*)¹¹ written perhaps between 1420 and 1440 and stemming perhaps from the circle of Heimeric de Campo, though not from Heimeric himself.¹² Hoenen argues that three themes are central to Cusa’s work of 1440: viz., the theme of learned ignorance, the theme of the coincidence of opposites in God, and the theme of the triunity of God—a triunity reflected in the nature of each creature. These are exactly the motifs, contends Hoenen, that Nicholas appropriates, unacknowledgedly, from the anonymous tractate. Yet, Hoenen’s reasoning is far from being “*nahezu sicher*” (“nearly certain”), as he claims in one place;¹³ nor does the reasoning serve to “make plausible” (“*plausibel machen*”) the inference about Cusa’s borrowing, as Hoenen more cautiously claims in another place.¹⁴

1.2.1. Hoenen’s reasoning is beset by many difficulties. Chief among them are the following ones. First of all, Hoenen unevenhandedly and unjustifiably assumes that whereas we are entitled to believe that Nicholas, in making use of the *Fundamentum Naturae*, both added to it and subtracted from it in a substantive way, we are not entitled to believe that the author of the *Fundamentum*, had he borrowed from Cusa’s *DI*, would substantially have modified—by adding to and subtracting from—the sections from which he copied. Thus, Hoenen wants to allow that Nicholas deliberately left out entire passages that

avored Aristotle's views¹⁵ but will not allow that the author of the *Fundamentum* would deliberately have omitted, from a borrowing from *DI*, either Nicholas's several references to the doctrine of *docta ignorantia* (learned ignorance) or Nicholas's allusions to Nicholas's own discussions elsewhere, both within and without *DI*.¹⁶

1.2.2. The foregoing assumption by Hoenen becomes linked to a second, equally unwarranted, assumption: viz., that the author of the *Fundamentum Naturae* would have to be regarded either as an author who made no use of Cusa's *DI* or as an author who was principally only a copyist and an excerpter of *DI*. However, there is no need to accept either of these alternatives. For it is eminently reasonable to maintain that the anonymous author borrowed from Cusa's *DI* in such a way as not to be simply a copyist or an excerpter of it. For the author seems to have been someone (a) who was influenced by the Aristotelian school and (b) who leaves aside certain passages in which Cusa disagrees with Aristotle, as well as certain other passages in which Cusa dwells upon the Platonists,¹⁷ but (c) who retains passages in which Cusa criticizes the Platonists,¹⁸ and (d) who expands upon the teachings of Aristotle by adding points that Cusa did not mention.¹⁹ Since the author is oriented toward Christian Aristotelianism, as Hoenen concedes, we need not be surprised that in borrowing from *DI* he does not appropriate Cusa's references to learned ignorance. For the doctrine of learned ignorance, which teaches that we have no non-metaphorical knowledge of *what* God is, is a doctrine that is incompatible with Christian Aristotelianism as it existed from the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries.

But why, then, asks Hoenen, if the anonymous author repudiated the *regula doctae ignorantiae* would he not also have disassociated himself from the cognate doctrine of the coincidence of opposites in God? In particular, why would he have borrowed the idea that "*in deo ... diversitas est identitas*"?²⁰ And why would he have appropriated Cusa's statement that "*non est ... aliquis motus simpliciter maximus, quia ille cum quiete coincidit*"?²¹ "These propositions," reminds Hoenen, "affirm the idea of the coincidence of opposites, and their content is tied up with the doctrine of learned ignorance. Moreover, they were central to the critique of Cusa, as we see from John Wenck's *De Ignota Litteratura*."²² Hoenen is here suggesting that a Christian Aristotelian would reject the doctrine of the coincidence of opposites just

as surely as he would reject the doctrine of learned ignorance.

But Hoenen's suggestion is wrongheaded. For, clearly, a Christian Aristotelian would *have to* reject the doctrine of learned ignorance with its implication that God as infinite would be unknowable except to Himself and with its corollary that the essence, or nature, of each finite thing, as it is in itself, is unattainable by any finite mind. On the other hand, however, a Christian Aristotelian could well accept the view that because of the Divine Simplicity "whatever is in God is God," so that in God motion and rest are identical, both with each other and with God, and so that in God diversity *is* identity. In fact, these latter conclusions are conclusions that certain Christian Platonists²³ and certain Christian Aristotelians²⁴ held in common. So one might well expect that the author of the *Fundamentum Naturae* would exclude from his use of *DI* II, 7-10 the claims about learned ignorance, while retaining the view that *in deo opposita coincidunt*—without carrying this latter view as far as Cusa does. For Cusa, but not everyone else, associated the doctrine of *coincidentia oppositorum in deo* with a denial of any positive, analogical knowledge of what the Divine Nature is or is like; that is, he associated it with an acceptance of the doctrine of learned ignorance. The fact that John Wenck and other Aristotelians attacked Nicholas's doctrine of *coincidentia* is really irrelevant to Hoenen's point and does not support his interpretation. For what Wenck criticized was not the doctrine that in God all things are God ontologically prior to their creation but was, rather, the doctrine that *the universe coincides with God*. However, this doctrine is not Cusa's, but is Wenck's misconceived ascription to Cusa, so that Nicholas in his *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* rightly defends himself against this misrepresentation.

1.2.3. Hoenen makes a third mistake: he assumes that in *DI* Cusa is generally distancing himself from Aristotelianism, so that (on Hoenen's interpretation) he skips over various Aristotelianisms in the anonymous tractate, from which he allegedly plagiarizes (see Hoenen, pp. 420-421). Yet, in truth, Cusa is not decidedly anti-Aristotelian in *DI*. Certainly the fact that in places he disagrees with Aristotle and criticizes him does not make him, in some more general way, hesitant to cite Aristotle's views. We must not forget that at *DI* I, 17 (47:12-14) Nicholas states: "Aristotle rightly says in the *Metaphysics* that the First is the measure of all things because it is the Essence of all things."

Likewise, we must remember his words in *DII*, 18 (53:15-16): “Wherefore, Aristotle was right in dividing all the things in the world into substance and accident.” Similarly, in Book Two of *DI* Nicholas agrees with Aristotle that the operation of the intellect “is to understand by means of an abstracted likeness” [II, 9 (150:24-25)], even though at *DI* II, 9 (148:1-4) he *disagrees* with Aristotle’s criticism of the Platonists’ conception of natures and essences, and even though later, viz., in *Apologia* 6, he criticizes the Aristotelian sect for extending application of the principle of non-contradiction unto the domain of the Infinite. So rather than our supposing with Hoenen that Nicholas deliberately omitted copying certain portions of the anonymous tractate, we will be on safer ground to hypothesize the following: the author of the *Fundamentum*, in borrowing from passages in *DI* II, 9, did not transcribe Nicholas’s criticism of Aristotle but did transcribe the passage wherein Nicholas agrees with Aristotle; and in the course of borrowing from other passages, such as *DI* II, 8, he added his own further points about Aristotle.²⁵

A clear indication of the fact that the author of the *Fundamentum* appropriates Cusa’s text, rather than vice versa, is the fact that toward the end of the tractate’s Chapter 1 (which contains certain Aristotelianisms that on Hoenen’s interpretation were left aside by Nicholas when plagiarizing) we find the following words that are reminiscent of a text in Cusa’s *DI* II, 4 (115): “deus non est sol neque luna, sed est id quod est sol et luna absolute.” And the explanation is added: “Sol enim et luna omniaque alia sunt in deo secundum suam naturam.”²⁶ It is highly unlikely that Nicholas would have been moved by this passage in the *Fundamentum* to write, at length, all that is contained in *DI* II, 4 (115) rather than that the author of the tractate took over this notion from Nicholas. Similarly, the statement that “non est alia veritas maxima circuli quam quadranguli”—found both at *DI* II, 9 (148:10) and in *Fundamentum* 2 (Hoenen, p. 466, line 5)—is a statement that is more likely borrowed by the anonymous author from Nicholas than vice versa.

1.2.4. Finally, as regards Nicholas’s use of Aristotle and Nicholas’s not being pervasively anti-Aristotelian: Long before writing *DI* Nicholas had shown himself indebted to certain of Aristotle’s political views—views which he quotes (by way of Marsilius of Padua) in the preface to Book Three of his *De Concordantia Catholica* (1433).

Precisely in this regard—i.e., in regard to Nicholas’s use of sources—Hoenen makes a fourth dubious assumption: viz., the assumption that because at times Nicholas elsewhere does not name his sources,²⁷ so it is neither unlikely nor surprising that in *DI* II, 7-10 he also does not name his source, viz., the *Fundamentum Naturae*. However, Hoenen needs to distinguish Nicholas’s practice in naming primary sources from his practice in naming secondary sources. It was not customary for Nicholas and others to cite the secondary sources from which they drew their quotations of primary sources (though occasionally they did so). Thus, at the outset of *De Concordantia Catholica* III, Nicholas cites Aristotle as his primary source, without citing Marsilius of Padua as the secondary source from whom he drew the Aristotle-quotations. Indeed, in general, Nicholas does credit his primary sources and thus could be expected to have credited even an anonymous author from whom he would be borrowing. In *De Concordantia* Nicholas does mention by name both Marsilius and his work *Defensor Pacis*, when he takes Marsilius as a primary source [see *De Concordantia* II, 24 (256:1-2 and 265:6-8)].

By way of further comparison: it is not true that Nicholas plagiarized Thierry of Chartres, as Pierre Duhem²⁸ and others allege in regard to *DI* II, 7-10 and elsewhere. For in *DI* II, 7-10 the reason that Nicholas did not mention Thierry of Chartres by name was that he did not know (indeed, it was not known) that Thierry was the author of the works from which he drew. So he ascribed the views simply to “*quidam*” (“certain ones”) and to “*alii, ut Platonici*” (“others, e.g., the Platonists”).²⁹ And in *Apologia* 24 he later spoke of this unknown “commentator on Boethius’s *De Trinitate*” as “easily the most intelligent man of all those whom I have read” A similar example of Nicholas’s citing an author even when he does not know his name is found in *De Ludo Globi* II (87:7-8): “*Sic optime ille vidit qui dixit: Quia deus est, omnia sunt.*” This quotation is drawn from the anonymous *Liber de Causis*,³⁰ which at one time was falsely ascribed to Aristotle but which by the second-half of the thirteenth century was known not to be Aristotle’s work. Because Nicholas had no knowledge of who the author was, he said simply “*ille ... qui,*” without claiming the quoted statement as his own.

In sum, then, the anonymous composer of *Fundamentum Naturae* appears to have been a Christian Aristotelian who borrowed from

Cusa's *DI* certain Aristotelian themes that he augmented³¹ and who left aside Cusa's criticism of Aristotle³² while appropriating Cusa's criticism of the Platonists.³³ Like the Aristotelian John Wenck, this anonymous writer repudiated the doctrine of learned ignorance, while, unlike Wenck, subscribing to a version of the doctrine of the coincidence of opposites in God.³⁴ He avoided the phrase "*coincidentia oppositorum*" both because it is not found in *DI* II, 7-10 and also, perhaps, because he did not want to be associated with that understanding of the doctrine that construed it as: *omnia cum deo coincidunt*. Similarly, he left aside Cusa's references to *De Coniecturis*, as well as his references to other parts of *DI*, because these references were irrelevant to his tractate, which nowhere mentions Cusa. Perhaps no such mention was made because the writer regarded himself as dealing, essentially, not with the views of his secondary source, viz., Cusa, but only with the views of Cusa's sources, i.e., with the views of the Peripatetics and the views of those "Platonists" referred to both in *DI* and in *Fundamentum Naturae*.³⁵

1.2.5. In any event, Hoenen has not succeeded in showing that it is *nahezu sicher* that Nicholas plagiarized the *Fundamentum Naturae*. In fact, he has not even succeeded in showing that the balance of evidence favors that hypothesis. For we have no scholarly need to grant Hoenen's four assumptions. Indeed, Hoenen's reading of *DI* II, 11 (156:3-6) is governed by a fifth assumption that also should not be granted: viz., the assumption that the phrase "*ista prius inaudita*" refers to what precedes it in *DI* II, 7-10 rather than to what succeeds it in *DI* II, 11-12, viz., Nicholas's cosmological speculations. Now, there is little reason to believe that in using this phrase Nicholas meant to refer to II, 7-10, since these chapters cannot be considered to contain new materials. In fact, Nicholas goes out of his way to indicate that they summarize and interpret already-known views. Thus, in those chapters he alludes to the Stoics, the Ancients, the Peripatetics, the Platonists, the Christian Platonists, Epicurus, Aristotle, and Pseudo-Hermes Trismegistus. And he speaks of the world-soul, of form, matter, and motion, of God as Absolute Possibility, Absolute Actuality, Absolute Union, as well as of God as Oneness, Equality, and Union. Nicholas does not claim that any of these ideas are new with him himself. Rather, he indicates such things as that the Ancients attained unto a conception of prime matter only by way of [an implicit learned] ig-

norance;³⁶ and he goes on to criticize their conception of absolute possibility.³⁷ So what Nicholas is claiming to be *prius inaudita* is not what is contained in *DI II*, 7-10 but, rather, those of his ideas that he is about to present in *II*, 11-12. Among those ideas are the following: that the earth is not the exact center of the universe, that the earth has neither a fixed material center nor a fixed material circumference, that God is both the center and the circumference of the earth, and that the earth is moved.

In the opening sentences of *DI II*, 11 Nicholas's Latin is ambiguous. Hoenen understands it one way;³⁸ Giovanni Santinello, another way.³⁹ Accordingly, the *context* becomes all-important; and the context favors the following (English) rendition:

Perhaps those who will read the following previously unheard of [doctrines] will be amazed, since learned ignorance shows these [doctrines] to be true. We already know from the aforesaid that the universe is trine, that of all things there is none which is not *one* from possibility, actuality, and uniting motion ... [etc.].

The (unintended) subtlety of Nicholas's Latin sentences lies in the fact that the word "*ista*" makes a forward reference, whereas the phrase "*ex istis*" makes a backwards reference. This fact has escaped most translators,⁴⁰ who have not sufficiently considered the context—a context in which Nicholas would be contradicting himself if at the outset of Chapter 11 he were labeling as his own novel views those very same views which in Chapters 7-10 he emphatically declared to have come from others. Hoenen blithely presumes—without discussion—that his own construal of the opening Latin sentence of *DI II*, 11 is the only one that is viable. It does not occur to him to question this presumption. Had he done so, he might have realized that Nicholas's words at the beginning of *DI II*, 12 ("*Ad ista iam dicta veteres non attigerunt, quia in docta ignorantia defecerunt*") confirm the conclusion that the novel doctrines to which the earlier phrase "*prius inauditus*" refers are those to which the Ancients *did not attain*: viz., the cosmological views just spoken of by Nicholas in *DI II*, 11 and about to be spoken of in *II*, 12. And Hoenen might also have seen that Nicholas's allusion in the dedicatory letter to Cardinal Julian⁴¹ is not to *DI II*, 7-10 but primarily to *II*, 11-12.

1.2.6. A sixth, and final, gratuitous assumption made by Hoenen is the assumption that because *DI II*, 6 ends with the words "*Amplius*

de trinitate eius subiciamus” (i.e., “Let me add some points about the universe’s trinity”), and because *DI II*, 10 ends with the words “*Et ista de trinitate universi sufficiant pro praesenti*” (i.e., “Let the preceding [remarks] about the trinity of the universe suffice for the present”), these words show that *DI II*, 7-10 constitutes an *independent treatise* contained within the larger framework of *DI*: “Die drei Kapitel, die von diesen Bemerkungen umschlossen werden, erscheinen somit als *eigenständiger Traktat* innerhalb des größeren Rahmens der *Docta ignorantia*” (Hoenen, p. 412, my italics). In truth, however, Nicholas’s words show only that Nicholas has there singled out for further development not an independent treatise but rather (as so often) a specific set of topics.⁴²

1.3. All in all, then, we may abide by the earlier judgment of Jaspers, Lohr, Haubst, and others to the effect that Nicholas is, indeed, an original metaphysician. And we may go further and assert with Jaspers that only one of Nicholas’s writings, viz., *De Docta Ignorantia*, taken together with *De Coniecturis*, “has the character of a complete sketch of his philosophy.”⁴³ It is this complete sketch—including not only the sketch’s new ideas but also the way in which the sketch utilizes its sources—that is original with Cusanus. For in the discipline of philosophy originality does not consist in making no use at all of background sources.

2. Cusanus as Humanistic Metaphysician: man, a second god.

Assessments of Nicholas of Cusa as a humanist run the full gamut from Paul Kristeller’s modest situating of him among those in the Renaissance who were “original thinkers marginally influenced by humanism”⁴⁴ to Michael Seidlmayer’s panegyric:

What that kind of world-view which we label “Christian humanism” can contribute to illuminating the existential situation of human being (and also just where this situation’s untraversable boundaries lie) has never in all the centuries of Christian history been displayed by any individual in such a profound, comprehensive, and likewise concentrated speculation as by this most ingenious of all the thinkers whom Germany produced before Leibniz.⁴⁵

How one situates “Nicholas the humanist” depends, of course, on how one construes the meaning of “Renaissance humanism” and of “Christian humanism.” According to Kristeller the *former* rubric indicates “that broad concern with the study and imitation of classical antiqui-

ty which was characteristic of the [Renaissance] period and found its expression in scholarship and education and in many other areas, including the arts and sciences”⁴⁶—whereas the *latter* rubric “has some validity if we denote by it those humanists who applied their classical scholarship to biblical and patristic studies and who adopted and defended in their writings some tenets of Christian religion or theology.”⁴⁷

In Kristeller’s two senses Cusanus is neither much of a Renaissance humanist nor much of a Christian humanist. For he has only a narrowly limited interest in studying classical Greek and Roman literature, in mastering Ciceronian syntax, in learning to read Plato and Aristotle in their original languages, or in cultivating the rhetorical flourishes of the *ars dictaminis*; and not much greater is his interest in developing a detailed knowledge of the patristic writers (except for Augustine) or in becoming a scholar learned in koine Greek, not to mention Old Testament Hebrew. Kristeller’s two senses, however, capture only a marginal aspect of what fifteenth-century humanism was. And when we come to understand such humanism as a school of thought whose focus was more richly diffuse than a primary centering on the *studia humanitatis*—i.e., on *grammatica, rhetorica, poetica, historia, and philosophia moralis*⁴⁸—we will see why Nicholas of Cusa was (far more than marginally) a veritable Renaissance humanist and a veritable Christian humanist.

2.1. To begin with, Nicholas *does* take some non-negligible interest in the ancient world—in its literature, its history, its moral philosophy. This interest can hardly be called peripheral. For it leads him to become a collector of manuscripts,⁴⁹ to discover twelve previously lost plays of Plautus, and, indeed, to found a private library in his birth-city of Kues. Furthermore, it leads him to develop a philosophy that is syncretistic, drawing, as it does, upon (a) Anaxagoras’s doctrine of ὁμοιομέρεια, (b) Pythagoras’s number-theory, (c) Socrates’ tenet that human wisdom begins with a knowledge of one’s ignorance, (d) Plato’s and Aristotle’s teachings on the cardinal virtues, (3) Cicero’s concept of *iustitia*, (f) Parmenides’ emphasis upon the One, and (g) Diogenes Laërtius’s characterizations (in his *Vitae Philosophorum*) of the Ancients’ teachings. Nicholas also displays an appreciable interest in language—in the use of vivid metaphors, creative neologisms, and paradoxical expressions. He refers to God by the neologisms “*possesit*”

(“Actualized-possibility”) and “*non-aliud*” (“Not-other”); and he refers to the Trinity by the theologically unusual names “*absolutum posse fieri*,” “*absolutum posse facere*,” and “*absolutus nexus <utriusque>*.”⁵⁰ God is said by him to be the Omnivoyant Eye, whose seeing is His being and whose being is His loving. He is the Absolute Exemplar of whom creatures are images; and yet, He is, as it were, also the unforsaking image, or shadow, of each creature. He is the Mirror-of-truth whom all creatures mirror defectively but in whom all creatures are mirrored as they truly are. His seeing is His creating, so that in seeing Himself He seems to create Himself. He dwells beyond the wall of absurdity—the wall of the coincidence of creating with being-created. He is *deus revelatus* who remains, however, *absconditus*. He is not only the Being of being but is also the Not-being of not-being. Although He is in all things, and all things are in Him, He is none of all things. He is apprehended only inapprehensibly, is seen only unseeably. He is the Oppositeness of opposites but is Oppositeness without oppositeness, since He is the Coincidence of opposites. He is named by every name and yet by no name. He is *one* in such a way as to be *three*, but He is three without being numerically three. He is the Immeasurable Measure of all things. Since He is both Maximum and Minimum, He is neither too small a Measure for anything nor too great a Measure for anything. Although unparticipatable, He is partaken of by all things through a likeness. More concretely, He is likenable both to an Omnipotent Minter of coins and to an uncountable Minted-Treasure. As the Fount of all beauty, He is also the End-Goal of all desire.

The combination of vivid metaphor and paradoxical expression bears witness to Nicholas’s veering away from Scholastic rigor-of-terminology and to his enthusiasm for freer forms of philosophical expression. He is self-consciously aware of the limits of his facility with the Latin language.⁵¹ Nevertheless, there is a certain beauty to some of his language, especially the more simplified language of his sermons, made alive through similitudes. In spite of his seeking to avoid “all roughness of style”⁵² in all his writings, he concedes that, being a German, he cannot attain the same eloquence in Latin as can the Italians.⁵³ His lack of elegant expression—and, even more, his lack of accurate expression—led to his being misunderstood by John Wenck and by other of his contemporaries, even as it continues to contribute to

misunderstandings of him today. This *ruditas* of his Latin style resulted in his not being fully embraced by the Italian *literati*, so that as the modern-day interpreter Paul Gamberoni observes:

In spite of his many personal acquaintances with humanists, Cusanus was rarely quoted by a humanist, just as also a humanist was rarely quoted by him. The number of humanist writings in his library, still in existence today in Kues, is relatively small. From the year 1440 on, the contacts between the Cardinal and the Italian humanists were also still only very sparse.⁵⁴

Nicholas, however, from beginning to end, never lost complete contact with the Italian humanists. “For already from the time of his student-days in Padua, and even more so from the time of the Council of Basel, Cusa, to be sure, came into quite close personal and literary contact with very many men who had a name and a reputation within Italian humanism. By Cesarini, Traversari, Parentucelli (Nicholas V), by Enea Silvio, Poggio, Leonardo Bruni, and others, the young man from Trier was held in greatest esteem as ‘*homo studiosissimus [et] multum eruditus*’ ...”⁵⁵

2.2. But Renaissance humanism is not a matter simply of cultivating both linguistic eloquence and a knowledge of the *studia humanitatis*: it is also, as Kristeller himself does not fail to mention, a concern with “many other areas, including the ... sciences.”⁵⁶ And in the area of the sciences Cusa’s focus is noteworthy. His “unusual” cosmological speculations in *DI* II, 11-12 have already caught our attention. And his several mathematical writings⁵⁷ evidence the attentiveness that he gave to geometry and to attempts to “square the circle”—attempts that he did not know to be futile.⁵⁸ From Alberti he gathered a fascination with perspective;⁵⁹ from Vitruvius, an appreciation of the science of architecture. Moreover, he excogitates about experiments done by means of weight-scales and water-clocks.⁶⁰ And into his theological reasoning he introduces considerations about infinity, declaring that God qua infinite is neither three nor one, neither good nor just, in any sense in which finite minds can comprehend these ascriptions.⁶¹ So very highly does he prize the role of mathematics in theology that he writes: “we have no certain knowledge except mathematical knowledge; and mathematical knowledge is a symbolism for investigating the works of God.”⁶² In no area of the sciences is Nicholas a specialist; nor is his interest decidedly technical. He approaches each area—whether it be astronomy, medicine,⁶³ physiology, or physics—

with those broad speculative aims that so often typified the dabblings of the humanists in the sciences. Like other humanists, too, he did not break fully with astrology or disassociate himself wholly from the dubious claims of alchemy, of physiognomy, and of geographical determinism.⁶⁴

2.3. Nicholas is also linked to the Italian humanists by his emphasis upon the dignity of man and upon man's centrality to the universe.

Just as the whole man shines forth in the hand, which is proportioned⁶⁵ to the whole, but, nevertheless, the whole perfection of man shines forth in a more perfect manner in the head: so the universe shines forth in each of its parts, for all things have their respective relation and proportion to the universe, but, nevertheless, the universe shines forth more greatly in that part which is called man than in any other part. Therefore, because the perfection of the totality of the universe shines forth more greatly in and through man, man is a perfect, but small, world and is a part of the large world.⁶⁶

In Nicholas's writings the theme of man as microcosm is found already in *De Docta Ignorantia* III, 3 (198), where it is said that human nature "though created a little lower than the angels, is elevated above all the [other] works of God; it enfolds intellectual and sensible nature and encloses all things within itself, so that the ancients were right in calling it a microcosm, or a small world."⁶⁷ Human nature, being a composite of a body and a soul, is an *intermediate* nature, inasmuch as it is a nature that is the lowest of the intellectual natures but the highest of the corporeal natures. Thus, human nature is a *mixed* nature—a theme developed by Nicholas as early as 1430.⁶⁸ This mixed nature enfolds all other created natures.⁶⁹ Accordingly, man is a second god (*secundus deus*), a god manqué (*deus occasionatus*), a created god (*deus creatus*), i.e., a finite god—in short, a human god (*humanus deus*).⁷⁰ For just as God Almighty enfolds within Himself all creatures ontologically prior to their creation, so also, though in a disproportionally and infinitely reduced way, man-the-microcosm enfolds all other creatures.

This enfolding is seen best in the human nature of Christ, whose maximally perfect human nature is united maximally to the absolutely perfect divine nature. But the maximal perfection of the human nature falls infinitely short of the absolute perfection of the divine nature. For Christ's human nature is as perfect as a human nature can become and still remain a human nature: there can be no greater human perfection than Christ's.⁷¹ But Christ's divine nature, being absolute-

ly perfect, is as perfect as perfect can be, since it is Perfection itself. Similarly, the maximal union of Christ's human nature to His divine nature is not a maximal union in the sense of being an infinite union, for "the finite cannot be infinitely united to the Infinite."⁷² Rather, it is a maximal union in the sense that the human nature could not be more greatly united to the divine nature and still remain a human nature. Accordingly, the maximality of the hypostatic union of the two natures—human and divine—falls infinitely short of the maximality of the infinite and absolute Union-of-Persons in the one Divine Nature, i.e., in the one God.⁷³

Through His human nature, as exalted in its union with the divine nature, Christ is the enfolding perfection of the universe;⁷⁴ and in Christ every man's human nature is perfectible. This tenet is the foundation of Nicholas's Christian humanism. Indeed, Nicholas goes to the extreme of saying that "since human nature, as being something intermediate, enfolds within itself [all] other [natures], the entire universe neither would be perfect nor would even exist unless God had assumed a human nature."⁷⁵ Only a Christian humanist could claim that the universe itself could not, and would not, exist apart from the Divine Incarnation—so essential was the assumption of a human nature.

According to Nicholas no created thing within the universe is infinite in any respect or in any sense. In its respective finite being each created thing "reflects" the Divine Being only to a finite degree, so that although Nicholas is prepared to call each created thing a "finite infinity," nonetheless a finite infinity is not at all an infinity; rather, the rubric is only a *modus loquendi* for that which is finite. When God created things so as to form a world, says Nicholas, His Infinite Form was received only finitely, so that creatures of every kind were as perfect as the Divine Perfection was able to be contingently received [*DI* II, 2 (104)]. However, Nicholas does call infinite the universe itself, as distinguished from created things within the universe; but it is infinite only in the qualified sense that it is finite but unbounded. Being unbounded, the universe has no limits outside itself, so that in that sense Nicholas calls the finite universe "unlimited," "privatively infinite," and "contractedly infinite" [*DI* II, 1 (97) and *DI* II, 4 (113:3)]. Thus, in accordance with his paradoxical use of language he also asserts that the universe is neither finite nor infinite. It is not finite, i.e.,

limited, because it is unbounded; it is not infinite, because it has a determinate measure known only to God. Although God, who is Being itself and who has no parts, is present as a whole everywhere and in each creature, thereby sustaining each creature in its finite being: the whole of God's presence, as expressed through His power and knowledge, is not located in any place or at any time or in any creature. Stated in a more pithily paradoxical way: "the Maximum is in each thing and in no thing" and "is everywhere and nowhere" [*DI* I, 17 (50:11-12) and *Sermo* VIII (19:5-6), respectively. Cf. Anselm, *Monologion* 20-22.]. Human knowing partakes of Divine Omniscience, and human power partakes of Divine Omnipotence; but they partake of them only finitely and contractedly. In short, the image of God in man is ever a finite image. Through this finite image the Infinite God shines forth to a greater or a lesser extent—though never perfectly, except in Christ, the Son of God, who, in being divine, is the perfect Image of the Father [*DI* I, 11 (30:13-18). Colossians 1:15]. So, in sum, why does Nicholas say of created things that they are finite *infinities*? He does so for several different reasons: first, because each created thing is Infinity *manqué*; secondly, because each created thing reflects God, who is Infinite; and, thirdly, because each thing in the original creation was as perfect as *it* could be, so that in this way it was a resemblance of God, who is as perfect as can be.

Hence, that which shines forth in all creatures, each of which is finite, is the fact that something Absolutely Infinite exists. That which does not shine forth is *what* this Absolute Infinity *is* in and of itself. As creatures, we can only surmise, in a symbolic way, about what Absolute Infinity, or God, is or is like. Through revelation we learn which symbols are the more appropriate ones, viz., symbols of perfections.

The fact that the human mind is such that it makes contact with the empirical world through perspectives is a fact about its finitude. Similarly, the fact that physical objects are always further-specifiable for the human mind—i.e., that the human mind can know a physical object from ever more perspectives and in ever more specification—is a fact about human finitude. For, so to speak, the "angle" only of God's eye is an infinite sphere, so that God is free of the cognitive limitations of perspective, because He views each object from an infinity of perspectives at once [*DVD* 8 (32)]. Nicholas's emphatic contrasting of human finitude with the disproportionality of Divine In-

finitude constitutes a thematic aspect of his Christian humanism. For although there is no proportion between the finite and the Infinite, we find that in drawing spiritually nearer to God, we draw ontologically closer to ourselves, since it is God who in giving Himself to us also gives us to ourselves [*DVD 7 (26:13-14)*].

Although angels are intelligences, or minds,⁷⁶ that are superior to human minds, nonetheless angels cannot be beings that enfold the perfection of all other things, inasmuch as, having no bodies, they cannot enfold the perfection of things material. Hence, Nicholas places human beings, and not angels, in the unique role of enfolding within their nature all other finite natures,⁷⁷ thereby reflecting within that nature the entire universe. This primacy of man—a primacy emphasized in one way or another by all Renaissance humanists, and emphasized in special ways by the Christian humanists of the Renaissance—exalts man, in certain respects, above the angels. For like God, human beings, but not angels, are creators: they are inventors of artifacts, of new concepts, of the arts and the sciences. Like a mapmaker⁷⁸ they construct a conceptual world from images entering through the senses; and like the mathematician they construct an intelligible world of numbers.⁷⁹ Though Nicholas emphasizes the primacy and centrality of man within the universe, he is willing to recognize that *each* created thing—and not only each man—may be called a created god, inasmuch as each created thing has as much perfection as it can have if it is to remain that individual thing. In other words, each created thing is as perfect as *it* can be:

Every created thing qua created thing is perfect—even if it seems less perfect in comparison with some other [created thing]. For the most gracious God imparts being to all things, in the manner in which being can be received. Therefore, since He imparts without difference and envy and since [what is imparted] is received in such a way that contingency does not allow it to be received otherwise or to a greater degree: every created being finds satisfaction in its own perfection, which it has from the Divine Being freely. It does not desire to be, as something more perfect, any other created thing. Rather, it prefers that which it itself has, as a divine gift, from the Maximum; and it wishes for this [gift] to be incorruptibly perfected and preserved.⁸⁰

In expressing this view Cusa displays an optimism characteristic of Renaissance humanism: a man desires to be a man and not an angel, even as an angel desires to be an angel rather than to be a man.

According to Nicholas's optimism, everything in the universe, including man, has its proper place and its own unique degree of perfection. The stars and the planets are themselves so arranged that unless their distances, sizes, locations, and motions were such as they are, this universe of ours could not exist.⁸¹ The fact that this present universe, which shines forth most greatly in and through man, exists in the best way that it can exist does not mean that it is the best of all possible worlds. For although God could not have created this world to be any better than it was prior to man's fall, He could have created vastly many better worlds than this present one.⁸² Similarly, as regards any given creature, God can create a more perfect creature; but He cannot create that very creature itself to be more perfect than it would be in a pre-fallen state. Thus, Nicholas's optimism differs from Leibniz's. For Nicholas would not agree with Leibniz that the present created world in its pre-fallen condition was the best of all possible worlds; instead, it was the best world that it could possibly be.

2.4. Most optimistic of all, in a humanistic sense, was Nicholas's conviction that a harmony of religious belief could be attained among all nations. Although differences of ritual and rite would remain, there would be but *religio una in rituum varietate*.⁸³ This common religion would be, fundamentally, the religion of Christianity, so that in *De Pace Fidei* Nicholas goes about contriving to show that the belief-structure of other nations' religions is compatible with, even reducible to, the set of core Christian beliefs. Nicholas has no doubt that the human being is *homo religiosus*, that by nature he desires to know God,⁸⁴ that a tendency toward religious belief is innate to him,⁸⁵ and, in short, that "there is present in all ... men by means of their specific nature a certain religion that promises them a higher, immortal end and that is partaken of variously ... by the inhabitants of this world."⁸⁶

In the domain of philosophy Nicholas entertains a corresponding aspiration: viz., to harmonize the teachings of all the philosophers.⁸⁷

That which all theologians or philosophers attempt to express in a variety of modes is a single thing. There is one kingdom of heaven, of which there is one likeness, which can be unfolded only in a variety of modes Zeno, Parmenides, Plato, or any others [among the philosophers or theologians] have not handed down different truths; rather, all of them viewed one [and the same] thing, but they spoke of it in various ways. For although their ways of speaking are at odds and seem incompatible, nevertheless [these teachers] attempted to explicate only the One, situated unattainably above

all contrariety.⁸⁸

In effect, then, Nicholas is seeking *philosophia una in modorum varietate*, although he does not use this expression. And he seeks this *philosophia una* in τὸ ἔν of Proclus and Plato, by whom he is influenced in developing his Christian Platonism⁸⁹ and in adorning it with a humanist's optimism.

A further striking instance of Nicholas's optimism is found in his confidence in the *idiot*—the common man, the man without formal schooling. Such a man possesses a wisdom, an insight, that may well elude the erudite and the learn-ed. We may call such a one a layman, if we like. The Layman, Nicholas detects, has a goodly portion of that which today is called common-sense and which in the seventeenth-century was referred to by Descartes as *bona mens: le bon sens*. Nicholas uses the figure of the Layman to praise wisdom and to teach about mind—about its innate power of judgment, about its natural immortality. The Layman is the one who in non-technical ways investigates the world through recourse to simple experiments that make use of weights and measures. The unpretentious figure of the Layman embodies the notion of Socratic ignorance⁹⁰ in combination with the Pauline conception that this world's wisdom is foolishness to God.⁹¹ Ironically, perhaps, it is the Layman who teaches that “mind, in and of itself, is an image of God” and that “all things [ontologically] subsequent to mind [are an image of God] only by way of mind.”⁹² In the end, the figure of the Layman serves figuratively to confirm the judgment of Scripture that divine wisdom is given to the humble but is withheld from the proud-hearted and the worldly-wise.⁹³

2.5. Nicholas's humanism consists, furthermore, in the fact that he exults in man's condition of freedom, while not neglecting to take account of the humanly uncontrollable vicissitudes of chance (*fortuna*). Freedom is what distinguishes the human being from the beast—freedom, that is, of mind,⁹⁴ of spirit,⁹⁵ of nature,⁹⁶ of will⁹⁷ Freedom is what contributes to the nobility that is found in the human being but not in the beast. Through freedom of mind the human being is an inventor. “For each man is free to think up whatever he wishes to Therefore, not all men think up the same thing, since each man has his own free spirit. But beasts are not like that. And so, they are impelled by nature toward the things that they do; and beasts of the same species engage in similar methods of hunting and build similar

necks.”⁹⁸ *Homo inventor* not only invents new games and new pieces of music and new musical instruments, etc., but also *formulates* and *develops*, for example, new arts and sciences, as Aristotle formulated and developed the rules for constructing valid syllogisms⁹⁹ or as Euclid formulated and proved his theorems of geometry. When Nicholas states in *De Coniecturis* II, 14 (144) that human nature does not create anything new, he means only that what it invents resides already within its power-to-invent and, thus, is not “foreign” to it. For in and through its actions human nature, as he says, has no other goal than to understand, govern, and conserve itself [*DC* II, 14 (145:12-21)]. And through understanding himself, governing himself, as well as through conserving himself, man approaches unto *deiformitas*, unto a likeness-to-God, in order that in the next life he may attain *deificatio*, the state of deification, i.e., the state of sonship with God (*filia-tio*).¹⁰⁰ To these ends God has created man in such a way that in this present life his spirit cannot be constrained by his animal nature, says Nicholas, even though his animal nature can be constrained by his free spirit, as instanced by someone’s leading a life of chastity.¹⁰¹ Likewise,

the power of free will does not at all depend on the body, as does the sensual power of our animal nature’s desire. Hence, the power of free will is not affected by the weakness of the body. For that power never grows old or grows faint, as, in the aged, do sensuality and the senses; rather, it remains [strong] and governs the senses. For example, when the eyes are directed toward an object, the free will does not always allow the eyes to observe the object but turns them away, in order that they not view what is worthless or shameful. [Or, again, the will restrains the appetites] so that one does not [always] eat when hungry¹⁰²

Freedom, then, of mind, or spirit, or intelligible nature, or rational will contributes to the dignity of man by making possible both the producing of novel things and the subordinating of the appetites. Indeed, freedom of spirit *consists in* the power to think creatively and the power to subordinate the appetites. Our appetitive desires, teaches Nicholas, must be distinguished from our intellectual desires. The former belong to us by virtue of our animal nature; the latter are an aspect of our intellectual love. For our intellectual spirit is a kind of love (*amor*); and the nature of that love is freedom (*libertas*). “For because of its nobility love is moved freely and cannot be compelled. Indeed, if it is subject to coercion, it cannot be true love but is a fake

love.... Therefore, the nature of pure love is to be free. And since the nature of love is to be turned toward what is loved ..., our spirit, insofar as ... it is love, is free and, in loving, can turn itself upwards or downwards.”¹⁰³ So if freedom of spirit consists of a power to think creatively and a power to repress the appetites, it consists, thirdly, for Nicholas, of the spirit’s power to direct its intellectual love—its will—upward towards Eternal Goodness itself or downwards toward transient and mutable goods. The identifying of love (*amor*) with will (*voluntas*) is as old as Augustine’s *De Trinitate*, with its symbolizing of the Trinity as *memoria, intelligentia, dilectio sive voluntas*.¹⁰⁴ Since man is made in the image of God, there is in him a oneness of intellectual love and rational will.

Nicholas does not treat the topic of free will in a systematic way, as does someone such as Anselm of Canterbury in his *De Libertate Arbitrii*. Among the reasons for his not doing so is his concern to stress (what John Locke was later to call) the freedom of the entire man.¹⁰⁵ Hence, Nicholas speaks as much of the freedom of the rational life, of the rational spirit, of the rational nature as he does of the freedom of the (rational) will. For the human being, in being (1) *free to* think inventively, (2) *free from* appetitive constraint, and (3) *free for* (the purpose of) loving the good is free in the fullest human sense.

Though free in the foregoing respects, man is not free from unforeseen contingencies and happenings. Granted that from a theological point of view Nicholas understands God to be providential, so that whatever happens happens for a reason,¹⁰⁶ nevertheless from a purely human perspective Nicholas speaks of occurrences of *fortuna*—of fortune, chance, luck. What occurs by chance is not uncaused but is merely unforeseen by us. *Fortuna* may be *bona* or *mala*; but in either case it is beyond our control. In *De Ludo Globi* Nicholas uses the elaborate symbolism of the bowling-game to illustrate the role that *fortuna* plays on the earthly scene.¹⁰⁷ A literary interest in *fortuna* and *fatum*¹⁰⁸ characterized Renaissance humanism, which drew these themes from its “rediscovery” of the Greek tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, as well as from Cicero’s *De Fato*.

2.6. In last analysis, then, Nicholas is rightly to be regarded as a veritable Renaissance humanist and, within Renaissance humanism, as a veritable Christian humanist: for (1) he drew seriously and repeatedly upon the literature and philosophy of the classical period,

without re-expressing these borrowings in the constricting Scholastic jargon of the High Middle Ages; (2) he displayed a keen interest in interpreting the results obtained by the sciences; (3) he stressed man's finite dignity and perfection, as well as man's centrality—especially the Incarnate Man's centrality—to the course of the universe; (4) he optimistically sought to outline an ecumenical theology and a universal philosophy; and (5) he signaled that human freedom, as glorious as it is, operates always in the shadow of unforeseeable fortune but to the end of self-knowledge, in addition to a knowledge of God.¹⁰⁹

3. *Cusanus as Surmising Metaphysician: De Coniecturis.*

3.1. The title "*De Coniecturis*" could without any real objection be translated into English as "*On Conjectures*." Nonetheless, a better English rendering is "*On Surmises*." The reason is the following: conjectures are sometimes things that may be wild conjectures or mere conjectures, i.e., mere guesses, hunches, or groundless suppositions; by contrast, surmises are always understood to have a foundation and to be based on some degree of evidence or of reason. And this latter notion is what Nicholas has in mind by his word "*coniecturae*," which signifies inferences that, whether or not they go beyond the evidence, are never without some basis either in fact or in reason. The closest that Nicholas comes to a definition of "*coniectura*" is found in *DC I*, 11 (57:10-11): "*Coniectura igitur est positiva assertio, in alteritate veritatem, uti est, participans*": "a *coniectura*, then, is a positive assertion that partakes—with a degree of otherness—of truth as it is [in itself]."¹¹⁰ According to Nicholas all of our cognitive judgments are *coniecturae* inasmuch as none of them attain the *precise* truth of the matter: there is always a degree of otherness, and objects of knowledge are always more and more incrementally knowable. They are knowable, for example, from still different perspectives, by means of still different instrumentation, with respect to still different measuring-scales, in relation to still different purposes, and so on. Nowadays we might illustratively add: they are knowable macroscopically or microscopically or chemically or atomically or genetically, and so on, with endless degrees of specificity within each cognitive context or cognitive mode.

So in interpreting Nicholas's statement that "every human affir-

mation about what is true is a *coniectura*,”¹¹¹ we must first of all avoid misinterpreting Nicholas to mean by “*coniectura*” a *mere conjecture*, i.e., a purely speculative assertion that is based on little or no supporting grounds. Similarly, a second misreading must also be avoided: viz., misinterpreting Nicholas to mean that we do not at all have either metaphysical or empirical *knowledge* but that we find ourselves stranded, as it were, in the realm of unreliable mental representations whose adequacy we have no way of assessing. For this second way of construing Nicholas’s notion of *coniectura* places Nicholas too centrally within a long line of thinkers who developed philosophical positions that were more and more skeptical—a line that began with William of Ockham in the fourteenth century and culminated with Pierre Charron’s *De la sagesse* in the sixteenth century. But, in truth, Nicholas’s calling our metaphysical and empirical judgments *coniecturae* does not aim at impugning their reliability but aims, rather, at signaling that all such judgments fall short of exactitude. Indeed, as Nicholas maintains, only mathematical knowledge (and, presumably, other forms of *a priori* knowledge) actually attain relative precision.¹¹² By contrast, empirical and metaphysical truths are imperfectly knowable by us, although with progressively greater precision. Thus, in these latter areas Nicholas speaks of a “surmising knowledge” (“*coniecturalis cognitio*”)¹¹³ and of “quite true surmises” (“*veriores coniecturae*”).¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, surmising knowledge is knowledge, and surmises that are quite true are true.

Clearly, then, Nicholas’s program in *DC* is a continuation of his earlier central theme in *DI*: viz., that our knowledge both of God and of the world lacks precision and is, accordingly, a form of learned ignorance. For the precise quiddity of the objects of our experience is unattainable by us,¹¹⁵ since a precise knowledge of their Cause, viz., God, is unattainable.¹¹⁶ Moreover, as Nicholas asserts in his later work *De Mente*, “a part is not known unless the whole is known, for the whole measures the part.”¹¹⁷ But, again, what he means is that a part is not *perfectly* known unless the whole to which it belongs is also perfectly known.

A third point must be kept in mind: viz., that the art of surmise (*ars coniecturalis*)¹¹⁸ is directed principally toward obtaining a surmising knowledge of oneself. Accordingly, Nicholas writes:

Since my entire effort is most fervent unto the following end, viz., that we

experience in ourselves a knowledge of truth, I will set forth certain preliminary explanations of general items-of-knowledge, in order that, at length, you may be able to arrive at the art of pursuing a knowledge of yourself—the art of pursuing it surmisingly, since all preciseness remains hidden from us.¹¹⁹

To be sure, this knowledge of oneself is surmising, because what exactly one *is* remains unknown. Nicholas makes this point clearer in *De Venatione Sapientiae* 29 (87), where he states that the intellect knows itself in the same way that it knows other things: viz., by means of mental representations, not by means of direct intuitions. Just as sight does not directly see itself, so intellect does not directly apprehend itself but apprehends itself in and through a likeness, i.e., in and through a concept. And concepts, even though they are assimilations, or likenesses, do not, on Nicholas's view, disclose intelligible objects as they *are* in and of themselves, i.e., as they are in their precise respective essence. Similarly, perceptual images do not disclose the respective quiddity of material objects as that quiddity *is* in and of itself. The "truth" of what something is is never fully captured either by an image or by a concept; on the contrary, a thing's exactly true nature is known only to God,¹²⁰ who apprehends every finite object from an infinity of perspectives.¹²¹ Nonetheless, the human intellect can, "through those things which it understands, make surmises about essential forms."¹²² Likewise, the intellect attains a knowledge of itself through *surmises* about itself. These surmises do indeed constitute *knowledge*; for they are not devoid of truth but are devoid simply of complete truth.

3.2. If *coniecturae* are surmises, then are the surmises in *De Coniecturis* surmises that are *philosophical*? That is, is *De Coniecturis* a *philosophical* work? Erhard-Wolfram Platzeck questions the extent to which it is. That work, he says, "is not a work of ontology; nor does it constitute a philosophical critique of knowledge.... Rather, in my opinion, it is a theologically-based epistemology whose principles stand in diverse analogical relations to a conception-of-the-Trinity that is indebted both to Augustine and to Pythagorean number-symbolism."¹²³ By contrast, Josef Koch, who spent more than twenty years working on *DC*, describes the work as "*rein philosophisch*" ("purely philosophical").¹²⁴ And, echoing Koch, Erich Meuthen, judges that *DC* "is perhaps Cusa's most philosophical work," inasmuch as *DI*, and above all its Book Three, "protrudes deeply into faith."¹²⁵

If Platzeck is right, so that *DC* is not fundamentally a work of ontology, then *DC* cannot serve to illustrate either Nicholas's metaphysical ingenuity or his view of the interrelationship between ontology and epistemology. If Platzeck is right, then the foundation of *DC* is the theology of the Trinity, according to which God's *Oneness* (the Father), *Equality-of-Oneness* (the Son), and *Union of Oneness and of Equality-of-Oneness* (the Holy Spirit) are reflected in the human mind's *oneness* (which enfolds all multitude), in its *equality* (which enfolds all magnitude), and in its *union* (which enfolds all composition).¹²⁶ According to Platzeck's way of viewing *DC*, the treatise is more a work of theological epistemology than it is a work centrally oriented toward philosophy. If, on the other hand, Koch is right, then *DC* represents a major Cusan attempt purely to philosophize—to ontologize even about the Trinity.¹²⁷ Furthermore, if Koch is right, then in *DC* Nicholas moves further away from a *Seinsmetaphysik* (metaphysic-of-being) than he did in *DI*—moves completely toward an *Einheitsmetaphysik* (metaphysic-of-oneness).¹²⁸ Let us turn to considering Koch's claims and thereafter return to the task of assessing the claims of Platzeck.

3.2.1. There is no doubt that in *DC* Nicholas takes as his theme *oneness*. Indeed, as early as Chapter 4 of Book One he distinguishes between four onenesses (*unitates*), which constitute four different ontological levels: viz., the respective realms of God, intelligence, the rational soul, and the corporeal. The first realm is that of infinite and uncontracted Absolute Oneness, from which the other three realms issue forth in creation. The second realm is principally that of the angels, each of whom is an intelligence partaking of the Divine Mind¹²⁹ through a likeness. The third realm is that of soul—primarily the human soul, which is rational, but also the souls of non-rational animals and of plants. Now, the human soul consists of the higher faculty of intellect and of the lower faculty of reason. Through intellect, man is the lowest in the order of intelligences; through reason he is the highest in the order of souls.¹³⁰ Through intellect the human soul partakes of God's likeness¹³¹ and is made in God's image. Similarly, through the orderliness and the ordering of nature non-rational souls partake of reason;¹³² and in that way they too are images of God, though more remotely so. In the oneness of the human soul are enfolded vital soul, perceptive soul, rational soul, and intellectual

soul,¹³³ so that the human soul represents the enfoldment of every kind of soul. The fourth realm is that of the corporeal and includes the material world and its elements. Since human nature consists not only of a soul but also of a body, man also partakes of this fourth realm, in addition to his partaking of the second and the first realms and in addition to his being located in the third realm. Similarly, what is corporeal partakes of soul.¹³⁴ In the case of the human body “the corporeal nature partakes of the intellectual nature” by way of the intermediate vegetative, perceptual, and rational powers.¹³⁵ And by way of the intellectual nature the corporeal nature (as well as all created material objects) partakes of Divine Triunity and is a remote image of God.¹³⁶

3.2.2. Just as there are four ontological levels, so there are four corresponding levels of discourse. Each of these levels has its own rules of intelligibility and of proper usage; and one and the same vocal word will have different meanings depending upon the level with respect to which it is used. For example, to assert that in God all things coincide will be proper; but to assert that they coincide in and for intellect or in and for reason would be improper. For in intellect only contradictories, such as motion and rest, coincide, whereas reason views them as irreconcilably opposed.¹³⁷ Likewise, with regard to meanings: To say that God existed yesterday will make sense only if it is understood, non-temporally, as indicating that God did not fail to exist yesterday because He is an eternal Being, and eternity encompasses time.¹³⁸ As Anselm of Canterbury wrote:

Therefore, when the apostle says that God foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and glorified His saints, none of these actions is earlier or later for God; rather, everything must be understood to exist at once in an eternal present. For eternity has its own “simultaneity” wherein exist all things that occur at the same time and place and that occur at different times and places.

But in order to show that he was not using these verbs in their temporal sense, the same apostle spoke in the past tense of even those events which are future. For temporally speaking, God had not already called, justified, and glorified those who He foreknew were still to be born. Thus, we recognize that for lack of a verb [properly] signifying the eternal present, the apostle used verbs of past tense; for things which are temporally past are altogether immutable, after the fashion of the eternal present.¹³⁹

Likewise, at the level of intelligences, to say that angels *have existed*

will make sense only if we understand “have existed” not as (in the case of God) an elliptical expression for eternal presence but as signifying a state in which past existence and present existence concur,¹⁴⁰ because angels do not age and their infused knowledge does not day by day increase. At the level of the rational soul, to say that a man existed yesterday implies that if he also exists today, then he is older and his state of consciousness has changed. Finally, at the corporeal level, the expression “the stone existed yesterday” does not have the same meaning as “the man existed yesterday,” because the way in which a stone has a past differs from the way in which a rational being has a past.

Another example of Nicholas’s illustrates his differentiation between the intellectual level and the rational level:

Although reason tells you that $2 + 3$ is precisely 5 (because this fact cannot be denied by reason’s judgment), nevertheless when you look unto reason’s oneness, viz., unto intellect, the claim that $2 + 3$ is 5 will not be true except within the domain of reason. (With regard to the intellect you will find that the number 5 is not *greater than* the number 2 or the number 3 and that one number is not *even* whereas another is *odd* and that one number is not *large* whereas another is *small*. For in the domain of intellect you will view reason’s every number as resolved into most simple oneness.)¹⁴¹

In a parallel way: although the definition of “circle” (“a geometrical figure every point of whose circumference is equidistant from that figure’s center”) holds good for reason, Nicholas does not allow that it holds true for intellect. For in the domain of intellects, or intelligences, the circle exists “without the otherness of lines and of circumference.”¹⁴² Reason, notes Nicholas, regards numbers such as *pi* (a transcendental number) and the square-root of two (an irrational number) as not-rational; for reason remains always at the level of proportionality, and these numbers introduce disproportionality.¹⁴³

A still further example of contextual meanings can be drawn from *DC* II, 13 (134) and from *De Ludo Globi* I (27): in the former passage Nicholas shows that the sense in which the intellect is said to have location differs from the sense in which the rational soul is said to have location; and in the latter passage he points out that the way in which the soul has location in the body differs from the way in which it has location apart from the body. In II, 13 (135) he makes a similar point about how the respect in which the intellect moves, i.e., intuitively, differs from the respect in which reason moves, i.e., inferentially.

So each of the four regions, or realms, or domains, has its own rules

of method¹⁴⁴ and its own distinctive meanings.¹⁴⁵ And in each of these regions oneness is something different. God's Oneness differs from the oneness of an intelligence, which differs from the oneness of a soul, which differs from the oneness of a material object. Moreover, since a human being is a unity (*unitas*) of body and soul, his oneness (*unitas*) differs from the oneness of the soul alone or of the body alone. Indeed, "for the soul to be in the body is for the soul to proceed into the body in such a way that the body's oneness enters into the soul."¹⁴⁶ Accordingly, "the soul is a form impressed on bodies by intelligence—impressed as [the form] of a seal is impressed on wax."¹⁴⁷ Just as the body has need of a soul, Nicholas says, so the soul has need of a body.¹⁴⁸ This unity of body-soul is so great that each soul is proportioned to its own body in such a way that it could not at all enliven a different body.¹⁴⁹ Nonetheless, "oneness-of-soul is more perfect than is oneness-of-body, because the purpose of oneness-of-body is oneness-of-soul. The corporeal depends upon oneness-of-soul as upon a certain beginning of the corporeal. For if the soul is removed, then the body's oneness is dissolved and perishes."¹⁵⁰

3.2.3. We are now in a better position to examine and to evaluate Koch's claim that in *DC* Nicholas develops more fully an *Einheitsmetaphysik* that distances him, more fully than in *DI*, from a *Seinsmetaphysik*. There can be no question about the fact of the *Einheitsmetaphysik*;¹⁵¹ there is a question only about how different in this regard *DC* and *DI* really are. Koch describes what he takes to be the intrinsic differences between an *Einheits-* and a *Seinsmetaphysik*:

To the metaphysic-of-being (*Seinsmetaphysik*) belongs the distinction between Being (i.e., God) and beings. To it also belongs the analogy of being, the distinction of degrees of being, the doctrine that all beings are composed of essence and act-of-being, and [the doctrine] that the essence of all material objects consists of form and matter. Thereto belongs also the acceptance of the principle of contradiction as an ontological law, etc. None of these [points] are now [i.e., in *DC*] either mentioned or disputed by Cusanus; instead, they are replaced—point for point—by his metaphysic-of-oneness (*Einheitsmetaphysik*).¹⁵²

Koch makes his distinction still clearer:

In this metaphysic-of-oneness there is no natural place for the [doctrine of] *analogia entis*, because all concepts presupposed by that doctrine are meaningless here. According to its nature the metaphysic-of-being is a metaphysics from below: i.e., it proceeds from beings (among which we find our-

selves), and with the aid of analogical concepts (*being, one, true, good, etc.*) it attempts to mount up to Being itself (i.e., God) and to make predications regarding Him. The metaphysic-of-oneness that is of Neoplatonic character is always a metaphysics from above: i.e., it proceeds from Absolute Oneness, as that which is the very first given thing, and from there it descends to an understanding of the world.¹⁵³

From the foregoing two passages, taken together with others in Koch's same work, we gather that Koch views the main differences between a metaphysic-of-being and a metaphysic-of-oneness to lie along the following lines: (1) the former metaphysics is a "metaphysics from below," while the latter metaphysics is a "metaphysics from above"; (2) the former sees God as Being-of-beings, the latter as Absolute Oneness; (3) the former reasons toward inferring God's existence, whereas the latter presupposes God's existence; (4) the former makes use of *analogia entis* and adheres to the doctrine of degrees of being, while the latter does not; (5) the former conceptualizes beings in terms of essence, act, potency, form, and matter, whereas the latter views beings as composites of oneness and otherness (*alteritas*); (6) the former makes no central use of the notion of participation, while the latter's use of that notion is essential; (7) the former does not accentuate the Neoplatonic doctrine of light, as does the latter; and, finally, (8) the former acknowledges the principle of contradiction as an ontological law, but the latter takes it to be only a law of thought. These eight overlapping differences are presumed by Koch to show that in *DC* Cusa pursues a more fully consequent "downward" metaphysical pathway.

3.2.4. But are the differences between *DI* and *DC* as striking as Koch wants to claim? That is, is it true that in *DI* Nicholas has not broken fully free of a *Seinsmetaphysik*, so that such a breaking free in *DC* constitutes a philosophical advance that *DC* makes in relation to *DI*?

Koch recognizes that both in *DI* and *DC* Nicholas excludes the doctrine of *analogia entis* and puts in its place the doctrine that *nulla proportio inter infinitum et finitum est*. Because there is no comparative relation between the Infinite and the finite, God remains unknowable to all finite minds¹⁵⁴ and is knowable only to Himself.¹⁵⁵ In *DI*, as also in *DC*, Nicholas proceeds to investigate God by way of symbols (*symbolice investigare*). In *DI*, as also in *DC*, Nicholas prefers the *via negativa* to the *via positiva*. Accordingly, even when in *DI* Nicholas

alludes to God as the Being of beings, this allusion is metaphorical, since God is not *being* in any sense that a human or an angelic mind can conceive of: “Although it is evident ... that the name ‘being’ (or any other name) is not a precise name for the Maximum (which is beyond every name), nevertheless it is necessary that being befit it maximally (but in a way not nameable by the name ‘maximum’) and above all nameable being.”¹⁵⁶ Even when in *DI* Nicholas is discussing the *via positiva*, he recognizes a distinction between reason (*ratio*) and intellect (*intellectus*) and sees that the *via positiva* leads us only into metaphor. If, for example we call God Infinite *Oneness*,

it is not the case that “Oneness” is the name of God in the way in which we either name or understand oneness; for just as God transcends all understanding, so, *a fortiori*, [He transcends] every name. Indeed, through a movement of reason, which is much lower than the intellect, names are bestowed for distinguishing between things. But since reason cannot leap beyond contradictories: as regards the movement of reason, there is not a name to which another [name] is not opposed. Therefore, as regards the movement of reason: plurality or multiplicity is opposed to oneness. Hence, not “oneness” but “Oneness to which neither otherness nor plurality is opposed” befits God. This is the maximum name, which enfolds all things in its simplicity of oneness; this is the name which is ineffable and above all understanding. For who could understand Infinite Oneness, which infinitely precedes all opposition ...?”¹⁵⁷

In *DI*, just as much as in *DC*, Nicholas emphasizes that God is Absolute Oneness.

Already in *DII*, 2 and I, 4 and I, 5 we find Nicholas arguing that although God is “Absolute Oneness” and “Infinite Oneness,” He is still unnameable and inconceivable, dwelling, as He does, in Inaccessible Light. Absolute Oneness is, Nicholas continues, Absolute Maximality and Absolute Being, since *unitas* (oneness) is *entitas* (being), as it were.¹⁵⁸ Although there is no *analogia entis* in *DI*, there *is* a doctrine of degrees of finite perfection—a doctrine nowhere denied in *DC* but rather embraced. For even *DC* teaches that angels are more perfect beings than are men, that men are more perfect beings than are non-rational animals, and that these latter are more perfect than are non-living beings. Similarly, among the angels themselves there are different orders and choirs of perfection. And in human beings intellect is more perfect than reason, which is more perfect than imagination or sensation. Finally, even in *DC* Nicholas refers to God as “the

Being of all beings” and as “the Quiddity of all quiddities.”¹⁵⁹ God, he also says there, is Being itself, Quiddity itself, Absolute Being, Absolute Quiddity.¹⁶⁰ Such metaphorical expressions are not inconsistent with an *Einheitsmetaphysik*. Accordingly, Nicholas writes at *De Ludo Globi* II (91:4-5): “God is the Oneness that is also Being, which enfolds all things insofar as they exist.”

Similarly, in both *DI* and *DC* Nicholas emphasizes the notion of participation. Although in *DC* this concept is thematized the more explicitly [viz., in *DC* I, 11 and II, 17 (vs. *DI* I, 17-18)], Nicholas makes the same basic point in both works: viz., that created minds, along with all other creatures, partake of the Divine Mind, or Divine Being,¹⁶¹ although they do not partake of it as it is in and of itself. Likewise, although in *DC* Nicholas makes fuller use (than in *DI*) of the metaphor of light and of the contrast between light and darkness, this metaphor does not serve to introduce into *DC* any ontological points that are inconsistent with the ontology of *DI*. We must remember that in *DI* as much as in *DC* God is “maximally light in such a way that He is minimally light.”¹⁶² He is “Infinite Light,” “Inaccessible Light,” “most simple Light,” Light that “shines within the darkness of our ignorance.”¹⁶³ Thus, that which is ontologically closer to God is ontologically more radiant; that which is ontologically further from God is ontologically more darkened—the very point made in *DC*.

In *DI* I, 6 Nicholas seeks reasons supporting his belief in an Absolute Maximum, i.e., in God. But these reasons are not intended to be *demonstrations* of God’s existence. They are, rather, *Hinweise*: indicators, or pointers—in this case, indicators of God’s existence, pointers in the direction of God’s existence.¹⁶⁴ In *DC* Nicholas does not repudiate these *Hinweise*; nor does he silently leave them behind. Instead, he silently accepts them, so that they serve as the background for his claim that, as regards affirmation, the affirmation of God’s existence is presupposed by the very question “Does God exist?”¹⁶⁵ Absolute Oneness, says Nicholas, cannot be called into doubt, because it is the “Being of all beings, the Quiddity of all quiddities, and the Cause of all causes,” so that if it did not exist and were not what it is, no other being would exist and be what it itself is.¹⁶⁶ This point in *DC* is the gist of the same point made in *DI* I, 6. Similarly, the gist of *DI* I, 26, dealing with the *via negativa*, is captured by *DC* I, 5 (21:10-12): “To the question whether God exists there can be no more

unrestricting response than that (1) it is not the case that either He exists or He does not exist and (2) it is not the case that He both exists and does not exist.” For God is beyond the very distinction between existing and not-existing, insofar as the human mind can discern the distinction. Thus, Nicholas states in *DI I*, 26 (88:15-16): “according to the theology of negation, there is not found in God anything other than infinity.” And this statement corresponds to the earlier statement in *DI I*, 4 (11:7-9): “Since [the absolutely Maximum] is not of the nature of those things which can be comparatively greater and lesser, it is beyond all that we can conceive.”

Finally, there is no incompatible difference between *DI* and *DC* as regards Nicholas’s “acceptance of the principle of contradiction as an ontological law,”¹⁶⁷ in contrast to his accepting it only as a formal principle. For in both *DI* and *DC* Nicholas accepts the principle of contradiction (or better: the principle of non-contradiction) as valid for the domain of reason but as not valid in the same way for intellect and as not valid at all for the domain of the Infinite. As has already been noted, in *DC* Nicholas puts the point as follows: “In the Divine Enfolding all things coincide without difference; in intellectual enfolding contradictories are compatible; in rational enfolding contraries are compatible, insofar as opposed differences are present in a [single] genus.”¹⁶⁸ And in *DC* he says further that “the root of all *rational* assertions is ... that a coincidence of opposites is not attainable.”¹⁶⁹ In *DI* Nicholas had already distinguished between reason and intellect, calling the latter the higher power.¹⁷⁰ And he implied, without thematizing his point, that whereas reason cannot “leap beyond contradictories,” intellect has that capability. In any event, nothing said in *DC* is at odds with *DI*’s acceptance of the principle of non-contradiction as ontologically (and not just logically) valid for the domain of reason; and, vice versa, nothing said in *DI* is at odds with *DC*’s acceptance of the principle of non-contradiction as both ontologically and logically valid for the domain of reason.

In *DI* Nicholas is already fully free of a so-called metaphysic-of-being. For in *DI* he already asserts that oneness is being and that being is oneness—a point made also in *DC*.¹⁷¹ He is free of a metaphysic-of-being even though he refers to God as Being and distinguishes between *Being* and *beings*, between *act* and *potency*, between *form* and *matter*, between *essence* and *existence*, between *substance* and *acci-*

dent—indeed, even though he refers to God as “all that which can be” (“*omne id quod esse potest*”).¹⁷² Even in *DC* Nicholas refers to God as the Being of beings¹⁷³ and makes all of the aforementioned distinctions.¹⁷⁴ The fact that in *DC* he does not use the formula “*Deus est omne id quod esse potest*”—a difference emphasized by Koch—is a difference that makes no difference. It is a difference that is akin to the difference that in *DC* Nicholas does not repeat the formula “*Nulla proportio inter infinitum et finitum*”—although he obviously continues to maintain the doctrine expressed by the formula. Likewise, in *DC* he continues to maintain the doctrine that God is the Absolute Maximum and is, ultimately speaking, all that which can be.¹⁷⁵

Koch supposes that in *DI* Nicholas is partly enmeshed in a *Seinsmetaphysik* and that he is struggling with doubts about it¹⁷⁶ so that his method of *symbolice investigare* is a *Sonderfall*—a special case, an exception.¹⁷⁷ But here too Koch is mistaken; for the method of *symbolice investigare* lies at the very heart of Nicholas’s doctrine of learned ignorance and of his assertion of *nulla proportio*. Nicholas’s questions in *DI* II, 2—questions such as “Who, in fact, can understand that God is the Form of being and nevertheless is not mingled with the creation?”—are purely rhetorical and do not express (as Koch maintains they do) Nicholas’s incipient doubts about a *Seinsmetaphysik* that he has not yet fully abandoned.

3.2.5. So in *DI* Nicholas did not subscribe, even partially, to a metaphysic-of-being from which he then went on in *DC* to extricate himself completely. In other words, Nicholas’s doctrines in *DI* constitute a metaphysic-of-oneness—to use Koch’s rubric—just as certainly and just as fully as they do in *DC*. For such a metaphysics can accommodate the concepts of being (vs. beings), actuality (vs. potentiality), essence (vs. existence), and substance (vs. accident). Koch is largely correct, however, in emphasizing that *DC* is a philosophical work, although his judgment that it is “*rein philosophisch*” seems too stark. Koch rightly draws attention to Nicholas’s fundamental ontology in *DC*, so that Platzek’s failure to identify such an ontology seems especially myopic. Nonetheless, Platzek himself rightly draws attention to the fact that no one of Nicholas’s writings—even this one that Meuthen has baptized “perhaps Cusa’s most philosophical work”—is ever “*rein philosophisch*,” as Meuthen himself would be quick to agree. Platzek would have been on safer ground had he ques-

tioned *DC* not for failing to be *philosophical* and, in particular, *ontological*, but for being too *contrivedly* philosophical. For the method of *figurarum manuductio* (guidance from diagrams)¹⁷⁸ allows Nicholas to use diagrams in a thoroughly tendentious and contrived manner, switching back and forth between Diagram P and Diagram U, in accordance as each of them serves his purpose.¹⁷⁹ Similarly, in accordance with the number-symbolism of *DC* I, 3 (10) he can assign special significance either to the number four or to the number ten,¹⁸⁰ as the occasion demands. And in accordance with Diagram U he can emphasize there being either three primary distinctions or four, whichever works out best for him at the time.¹⁸¹ And when he wants to emphasize the numbers six, seven, and ten—because he needs to make a point about a sixfold progression or greater—he introduces a new diagram, as in *DC* II, 7 (107) or II, 7 (109). A similar phenomenon occurs in *De Ludo Globi*, where he has illustrative recourse either to nine or to ten circles, as he will, because although he describes *ten* concentric circles, he declares that the tenth, and innermost, circle coincides with the center (and thus, if need be, it can be treated not as a tenth circle but as the center of the nine circles).¹⁸²

3.2.6. In last analysis, *DC* represents a continuation of Nicholas's program in *DI*. For Nicholas retains the theme of learned ignorance both with respect to God's "Quiddity" and with respect to all finite quiddities. Similarly, he continues in *DC* to prefer the *via negativa* to the *via positiva*, as well as continuing to reject the doctrine of *analogia entis*, while retaining a hierarchical conception of degrees of finite perfection. What is new in *DC* is (1) the accentuation of *figurarum manuductio*, (2) extended discussion about the nature of the four elements, (3) a more extensive differentiation between *ratio* and *intellectus*,¹⁸³ (4) a more explicit contextualizing of meanings, along with (5) a more explicit relativizing of investigative methods, so that the rules of rational investigation differ from the rules of intellectual investigation, which differ from the rules for investigating the Divine Nature. Whether we view Nicholas's elaborate effort in *DC* as deeply insightful or only as superficially clever will depend upon how far we think that his scheme can be applied. Some interpreters, for example, have claimed to see in *DC* an imitation of the *ars generalis sciendi* of Ramon Lull;¹⁸⁴ others such as Koch see little such influence.¹⁸⁵ Some interpreters have understood *DC* to represent Cusa's turning to-

ward nominalism and away from the metaphysical realism of *DI*, while others see no such movement. Some interpreters of *DC* wish to accentuate certain parallels with Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of language-games and of meaning-as-use, whereas others regard the metaphysical use to which Nicholas puts language as rendering the parallelism too remote to be philosophically plausible.

All in all, we will do better as interpreters of Nicholas of Cusa to begin by looking for the lines of continuity between *DI* and *DC* rather than to begin by pre-understanding *DC* to contain some catapultingly innovative ontology and epistemology in comparison with *DI*. (Not even Koch claims there to be such a radical innovation.) For what we find in those of Nicholas's works that are subsequent to *DC* is a strong continuity with the philosophical program of *DI*. And it would indeed be strange for Nicholas to have written these subsequent works—especially the *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*—and nowhere in them openly to have repudiated his doctrines in *DC*, if *DC* were understood by him to be at odds with his approach in *DI* and, therefore, also with his approach in his post-*DC* works as well. Certainly in those later works Nicholas's views undergo changes. But they do not undergo essential changes such as would constitute either a rupture with, or an inconsistent departure from, his fundamental philosophical program in *DI*.

3.3. But what, then, will explain the alleged fact that not a single one of *DI*'s seven anticipatory allusions to *DC* is such that in *DC* Nicholas actually does what he tells us in *DI* that he is going to do? Josef Koch makes much of the foregoing question: "In *De Docta Ignorantia* we find seven explicit references to something that he [Nicholas] wants to deal with in *De Coniecturis* or that he has reserved for that writing. In the Heidelberg Academy's edition [of *De Docta Ignorantia*] these references are 'verified' in the text of *De Coniecturis*. But if one examines these verified passages, no single one of them is accurate."¹⁸⁶ Let us examine, then, the seven passages occurring in *DI*, five of which occur in Book Two, with two more occurring in Book Three.¹⁸⁷

3.3.1. *DI* II, 1 (95): Nicholas indicates that in *DC* he will treat further his claim that things which are from opposites (opposites such as simple - composite; abstract - concrete; formal - material; corruptible - incorruptible) *are* so with differences of degree. Ernst Hoffmann and

Raymond Klibansky's Heidelberg Academy edition of *DI* gives as a cross-reference *DC* I, 12 of the Paris edition (1514).¹⁸⁸ This reference is correct, because it corresponds to *DC* I, 10 of the more recent Heidelberg Academy edition [Vol. III (1972) of *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia*]. More precisely, we can specify sections 44 and 45, so that the fuller updated reference would be to *DC* I, 10 (44-45), where Nicholas is applying his Diagram P. In terms of this diagram Nicholas does do that which in *DI* II, 1 (95) he says that he will do.

3.3.2. *DI* II, 6 (123): In II, 6 (123-125) Nicholas discusses the “unfolding” of the universe (which is a second oneness) from Absolute Oneness (which is the absolutely First Oneness). The second oneness—or first *contracted* oneness—is said to be a tenfold oneness, and it is likened to the root-number 10, from which arises a square number (viz., 100) and a cubic number (viz., 1000). As this number-symbolism is applied, the universe is represented by the ten Aristotelian categories; from out of the universe there “descend,” i.e., there are “unfolded,” genera; from genera there descend species; and from species there descend individuals. Thus, there is a *fourfold* descent (viz., from God to the universe; from the universe to genera; from genera to species; from species to individuals) or a *threefold* descent, if one speaks only of the unfolding of the universe. Likewise, the descent may be spoken of as like a numerical progression: 1 (universe), 10 (genera), 100 (species), 1000 (individuals). The Heidelberg Academy edition of *DI* gives as cross-references *DC* I, 5 and I, 7 of the Paris edition; these correspond respectively to *DC* I, 3 and I, 5 of the subsequently available Heidelberg Academy edition of *DC*. But it would be better to cite *DC* I, 13, where Nicholas plays around with applying his number-symbolism in terms of Diagram U. Obviously, as Koch notes, the number-symbolism is put to a use different in *DC* from its use in *DI*. For in *DC* the four onenesses are no longer *universe, genera, species, individuals* but are, rather, *God, intelligence, soul, body* (i.e., *material object*). From the time of writing *DI* II, 6 to the time of writing *DC* II, 6, Nicholas further developed his thinking. Yet, both in *DI* and *DC* he is dealing with the metaphysical theme of the relationship between oneness and otherness. God is always considered by Nicholas to be Absolute Oneness, and the universe and its components are always considered to be various ontological gradations of oneness-in-otherness and of otherness-in-oneness. For the universe (including

its components) consists of everything *other* than God, in whom there is no otherness,¹⁸⁹ even though God is in all things and all things are in God.¹⁹⁰ Because man and all other beings are created in a likeness of God, no otherness characterizes their respective essence as such.¹⁹¹

Moreover, although the onenesses that Nicholas focuses on in *DI* and *DC* are different, Nicholas does not introduce into *DC* any instance of *unitas* that he would not have accepted in *DI*; nor does he in *DC* repudiate any instances of *unitas* that *DI* accepted as being such instances. Thus, just as in *DC* he regards God, intelligences, souls, and corporeal objects as instances of *unitates*, so he also regarded them as such instances in *DI*; for in *DI* intelligences are individually distinct things, souls are individually distinct things, and corporeal objects are individually distinct things. Similarly, in *DC* Nicholas accepts *DI*'s hierarchy of onenesses: viz., what is universal, what is general, or generic, what is specific, and what is particular. This latter fact is clear from *DC* II, 2 (84:7-10), II, 3-4 (88:13 - 90:9), and II, 5 (95:9-15). So *DC* with all of its diagrammatic reasoning is no more essentially incompatible with *DI* than is *De Ludo Globi* incompatible with *DC* simply because *De Ludo Globi*'s diagram of concentric circles emphasizes nine and ten distinctions of things rather than repeating *DC*'s primary emphasis on three and four distinctions of things. In both *DC* and *De Ludo Globi* Nicholas is surmising in symbolical ways. And he sees that various symbolisms and divisions can be used to make the same basic point about God's Absolute Oneness in relation to the multiple onenesses of the universe. This freedom to vary his symbolisms is quintessential to the fact that Nicholas is *speculating*.

3.3.3. *DI* II, 6 (126:1-2): Here Nicholas notes that in *DC* he will discuss in more detail how it is that "the universal is in the intellect as a result of the [process of] abstracting." The Heidelberg Academy edition gives as cross-references *DC* II, 13 and II, 16. And these are the correct references. For *DC* II, 13 (134:30) refers to the intellect as the locus of universals. And *DC* II, 16 (159:4-8) maintains that the intellect makes representations, in the imagination, of those things which are perceived; and "when it inquires about their form [*ratio*], it proceeds unto an act of understanding and unto a knowledge of the true object. For it unites—in the imagination—the differences of the things perceived. It unites—in reason—the variety of differences

among images. It unites—in its own simple intellectual oneness—the various differences of forms.” This making of representations, this uniting, this synthesizing involves abstracting and involves the forming of concepts. In this way the intellect embraces truths that have been “elevated upward from images,”¹⁹² so that the intellect “takes its starting-point from things perceptual.”¹⁹³ For the human mind forms rational entities in the likeness of real entities.¹⁹⁴ At times Nicholas resorts to metaphors in expressing the idea of the intellect’s abstracting. He speaks, for example, of the intellect’s entering into images in proportion to their being “absorbed” by its light.¹⁹⁵ This absorption, so-called, is really an abstracting of the *intelligiblis species* from the sensory images.¹⁹⁶ The content of images is universalized by the intellect, and in the intellect it *is* the intellect. This universalizing is referred to in various ways by Nicholas. It is an “intellectually *creating [and] ordering ...*”¹⁹⁷ It is an “act of understanding,”¹⁹⁸ an act of assimilating,¹⁹⁹ whereby an absorbing occurs.

So although in *DC* Nicholas did not *develop* the theme of the intellect’s abstracting a universal form from perceptual images, nonetheless he did not altogether ignore the topic.

3.3.4. *DI* II, 8 (140:9-13): “What is said about potency or possibility or matter needs to be qualified, in the foregoing manner, according to the rules of learned ignorance. How it is that possibility proceeds by steps to actuality, I leave to be dealt with in the book *On Surmises*.” The Heidelberg Academy edition cites *DC* II, 9. This citation is certainly correct, although the editors should also cite *DC* II, 7 (107-110), II, 8 (112), II, 11 (130), and II, 13 (137). In terms of Diagram P and other diagrams Nicholas does in *DC* elaborate upon the progressive gradations from potentiality to actuality, as, for example, in I, 10 (44-45 and 49).

3.3.5. *DI* II, 9 (150:20-26): “Therefore, forms do not have actual existence except (1) in the Word as Word and (2) contractedly in things. But although the forms which are in the created intellectual nature exist with a greater degree of independence, in accordance with the intellectual nature, nevertheless they are not uncontracted; and so, they *are* the intellect, whose operation is to understand by means of an abstract likeness, as Aristotle says. In the book *On Surmises* [I will include] certain points regarding this [topic].” The Heidelberg Academy edition cites as reference *DC* II, 13, a reference that can be made

more precise: *DC* II, 13 (134:29-33). Moreover, the following references might be added thereto: *DC* I, 6 (25) and II, 14 (145:12-20), together with the references in section 3.3.3 above. Nicholas does not go into detail about conceptual forms in the mind nor about the mind's abstracting of universals from sensory images; but he never promised to do so. He promised only to say *quaedam* (certain things), not *multa* (many things). And, to be sure, he does make certain scattered points about how things (including forms) exist differently in the intellect and in reason; and he does use the language of *uniting, creating, absorbing* as a substitute for the verb "*abstrahere*".

3.3.6. *DI* III, 1 (187:8): "Now, presumably, there are other spirits. ([I will discuss] these in *On Surmises*.)" The Heidelberg Academy edition cites as cross-references: *DC* II, 10 and II, 13. And these citations are correct.

3.3.7. *DI* III, 1 (188): Here Nicholas speaks of a hierarchy of genera and species such that within the range between the actually (vs. conceivably) *highest* species of the highest genus and the actually (vs. conceivably) *lowest* species of the lowest genus no two things are ever equal in any given respect. And he adds: "Similarly, a square inscribed in a circle passes—with respect to the size of the circumscribing circle²⁰⁰—from being a square which is smaller than the circle to being a square larger than the circle, without ever arriving at being equal to the circle. And an angle of incidence increases from being lesser than a right [angle] to being greater [than a right angle] without the medium of equality. (Many of these points will be brought out in the book *On Surmises*.)" The points to be looked for in *DC* are the points about the hierarchy and about the inequality. The Heidelberg Academy edition provides the cross-reference *DC* II, 2. And this reference—when made more precise by specifying "*DC* II, 2 (80-82)"—is fine. However, we might also include *DC* I, 10 (50); II, 3; II, 4 (90); II, 11 (129); II, 16 (155-157 and 162). For these passages address either the topic of hierarchy or of inequality. However, Nicholas's entire idea in *DI* III, 1 (188) is contained implicitly in *DC* I, 10 in the application of his Diagram P. And he relies upon the reader's having enough insight to draw out this idea for himself, once the Diagram has been explained.

3.4. As we see, then, it is not true, unqualifiedly, that (as Koch claims) "no single one of ... [Nicholas's allusions in *DI* to his future

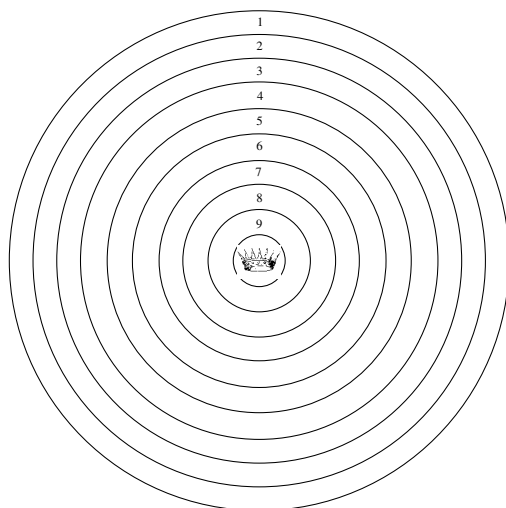
DC] is accurate.” Rather, what is true is that Nicholas does not in each instance present us with a detailed discussion, in *DC*, of the topics that he foretold of in *DI*. Nevertheless, we will do well to insist on the many linkages between *DI* and *DC*. For, assuredly, *DC* does not present us either with a reversal of directions in comparison with *DI* or with a more explicit ontology. Nor is it a more philosophical work than is *DI*, in spite of the fact that *DI* contains Book Three on Christ and on the Church. For *DI*’s Books One and Two are as philosophical as is anything in *DC*; nor does *DC* aim to leave aside all theological considerations. Indeed, in *DC* theological considerations constitute the framework within which Nicholas develops his thoughts about Absolute Oneness (i.e., God) and about otherness (i.e., the universe and its constituents). That is to say, *DC* begins with theological considerations and ends with theological considerations and presupposes theological considerations in-between. In *DC* I, 1 we find Nicholas appealing to the theological view that “God works all things for His own sake”²⁰¹ There, too, God is called the Creating Nature; and man is said to be in His image. God is a Trinity of Absolute Oneness, Absolute Equality, and Absolute Union;²⁰² likewise, the human mind is a triune beginning, viz., a beginning of multitude, magnitude, and composition. At the end of *DC*, too, Nicholas introduces the theological considerations that God is Love, that some men are elect, and that the more men love God the more they partake of Divinity.²⁰³ Moreover, he refers once again not only to God’s Triunity but also to man’s imaging of the Triunity in his own oneness, equality, and union.²⁰⁴ And in between the beginning of *DC* and its end, Nicholas regards his discourse about Absolute Oneness as a mode of theology—a theology, or knowledge of God, that he refers to, in its purity, as “the theology that is inexpressible in words.”²⁰⁵ Likewise, he speaks of God as the “Director, Ordainer, and Governor of all things.”²⁰⁶ God is the Oneness of all beauty, the Oneness of all delectable sweetness.²⁰⁷ He is the Co-eternal Word.²⁰⁸

Yet, in Books One and Two of *DC* Nicholas does not expand upon his theological motifs, even as he did not expand upon them in Books One and Two of *DI*. As Koch observes regarding *DC*: Nicholas’s recourse to the doctrine of the Trinity represents a more pronouncedly philosophical approach than it does a theological approach.²⁰⁹ Still, no one should ignore the theological elements; and everyone should rec-

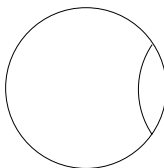
ognize that even though *DC*'s approach is philosophical more than it is theological, it is not for that reason any the less surmising.

4. *Cusanus as Playful Metaphysician: De Ludo Globi.*

4.1. As its name suggests, the dialogue *De Ludo Globi* is constructed around the elaborate symbolism of a bowling-game. This is a simple game whose rules Nicholas himself formulates not in order to have a game to play but in order to have a game the playing of which will illustrate a number of philosophical and theological declarations. It is a game that may be played outdoors or indoors, on any surface that permits both the tracing onto it of circles and the reasonably smooth rolling of the bowling-ball. Neither the size of the ball nor that of the circles is specified by Nicholas; accordingly, they are discretionary. The circles are to be ten in number²¹⁰ and are to be arranged concentrically and assigned points as follows:



The wooden bowling-ball is not to be fully round but is to have a concave arc carved into one of its hemispheres, more or less as follows:



The indentation, produced by the carving away of the wood, results

in a bowling-ball that is unevenly weighted, so that it will not roll in a straight line when released from the hand of a bowler. The distance of the bowler from the circles is also left unspecified by Nicholas. But the object of the game is to bowl the ball in such a way that it will come to rest within the circumference of the concentric circles and as close to the center as possible. If it does come to rest within the circles, rather than straying, it will score the number of points assigned to the ring within which it stops. Whichever player is the first to score thirty-four points wins the game.²¹¹

The game has many symbolisms. For example, the thirty-four points symbolize the years of Christ's life.²¹² The tenth, and innermost, circle is the smallest and is said to coincide with its center, which is the common center of all the circles. This circle-center represents the Kingdom of Life, i.e., the Kingdom of Christ, who ought to be the Center of the Christian's life and who in Scripture is called the Way, the Truth, and the Life.²¹³ Thus, the tenth circle, or Circle of Life,²¹⁴ is also the Center of Life.²¹⁵ The nine other circles represent degrees of proximity to Christ and to virtue, for Christ is Virtue itself, as Nicholas elsewhere says.²¹⁶ The circles, taken collectively, symbolize gradations of development in the lives of Christians,²¹⁷ so that in this respect the circles do not apply to unbelievers. Yet, they can be given a more neutral symbolic construal—as Nicholas does give them in *LG II* (104), where the circular levels (from outermost to innermost) stand for (1) chaos, (2) the power of the elements, (3) the power of minerals, (4) vegetative power, (5) perceptual power, (6) imaginative power, (7) rational power, (8) intelligential power, (9) intellectible power, and (10) the Power of powers. The last-mentioned power is God, whereas powers eight and nine are angels' powers-of-comprehension. In Latin the word for power and the word for virtue are the same, viz., "*virtus*"; hence, it is easy for Nicholas to move from the topic of *virtus moralis* to the topic of *virtus essendi et cognoscendi*, the gradations of both kinds of *virtus* being gradations of perfection.

The movement of the bowling-ball symbolizes the movement of a Christian's life, a movement that is never along a perfectly straight line, since even aside from unforeseeable and deflecting events of "fate," or "fortune," a Christian is beset by his own moral waywardness. Each man, says John, Nicholas's discussant, "is his own 'bowl-

ing-ball,' curved differently from [any] other bowling-ball." Nicholas responds by continuing with the moral analogy:

This is the deepest symbolism of this game: viz., that we learn how to straighten out, by the practice of virtue, these inclinations and natural curvatures—to do so in such a way that at length, after many variations and unstable circular movements and curvatures, we come to rest in the Kingdom of Life. For you see that one man throws the ball in one manner, another in another manner, while the same curvature remains in the ball. In accordance with the varying impulse, the bowling-ball is moved differently and stops at different places; and before it stops, we never know for sure where it will finally stop.²¹⁸

In moving the bowling-ball of his life, a Christian is to imitate Christ, who "moved the bowling-ball of His own person in such a way that it would come to rest at the Center of Life."²¹⁹ John speaks of how *difficult* it is to "direct the curved bowling-ball so that it follows the pathway of Christ."²²⁰ But Nicholas replies in terms of the theological virtues: "It is very *easy* for one who has true faith.... If the 'bowling-ball' of your person is impelled by the spirit of *faith*, then (1) it is guided by steadfast *hope*, and (2) by *love* it is bound to Christ, who will lead you with Him unto Life. But such is impossible for an unbeliever."²²¹

In the practice of moral virtue one's pursuit is free; for each man knows that good is to be chosen and that evil is to be shunned, just as each man has a basic knowledge of the difference between what is honorable and what is dishonorable.²²² Moreover, each man has the power to will, or not to will, that which he knows to be honorable.²²³ Yet, though a man's moral life can progress in accordance with his intentions, his biological or social or economic life eludes his full control, even as the pathway taken by the thrown bowling-ball does not fully conform to the route intended for it by the bowler. Even aside from considerations of the lopsided weighting of the ball, the ball, when underway, may strike a pebble or come across an unevenness-of-surface that may cause it to veer either towards the center of the circles or away from the center. This event, unforeseen by the bowler, is analogous to an event of fortune—good fortune or bad, as the case may be.

Nicholas works out the symbolisms of the game in ways that are more impressionistic than systematic. He allows himself a certain speculative license when it comes to applying the symbolism. For ex-

ample, when he considers the empirical fact that however often the ball is thrown it will not describe exactly the same path as previously, he can liken this to the ontological fact that no two things—whether events or objects—are ever exactly alike in any given particular respect.²²⁴ Speculative license leads him to view his inventing of the bowling-game as his mind's making a threefold movement: viz., *thinking about* inventing a game of skill, *considering* what kind of game it should be, and *determining* what the game's constitutive rules will be.

The soul is life, because it is reason, which is a living movement. Therefore, when I think-about, consider, and determine, what else occurs than that the rational spirit—which is a thinking, considering, and determining power—moves itself? And when I inquire about the determination of the soul, as to what the soul is, then don't I also think-about and consider? And I find that in this [mental activity] the soul moves itself with a circular movement, because that movement is turned back on itself. For when I think about thinking, [this] movement is circular and self-moving. And, hence, movement-of-soul, which is life, is perpetual, because it is a circular movement that is turned back on itself."²²⁵

So the invention of the game involves the thinking-up of something new—involves a novel conjuring-up, of which non-human animals are incapable. Birds of the same species always build the same kind of nests; beavers, the same kind of dams. Lions and wolves always hunt in their same respective ways. But the human soul moves itself rationally and intellectually and, therefore, creatively. Indeed, the human soul's rational-intellectual movement is a substantial movement in the sense that the mind is a unified,²²⁶ *self-moving* power: intellectual motion does not just *happen* to it; rather, the power of intellectual movement constitutes its very essence. Since the mind moves itself, it exists unendingly, or perpetually. Signs of this self-movement are seen, explains Nicholas, not only in the mind's inventiveness but also in its perceptual and intellectual apprehending, whereby it makes itself to be a likeness of apprehended objects by forming for itself images and concepts.²²⁷ Since for the soul to be alive is for it to move itself, the soul "is more truly alive than is the human body (*homo*), which is moved by the soul."²²⁸

But Nicholas goes further than merely attempting to render plausible the rational soul's substantiality and immortality: he attempts to illustrate a way in which the rational soul reflects the Divine Triuni-

ty. “Thinking-about,” says John, “begets considering; and determining proceeds from thinking-about and considering; and [the three of them] are only one living-movement that moves itself perfectly.”²²⁹ And John concludes: “if for the perfection of our spirit there is required, necessarily, that our spirit be triune . . . , then assuredly those who deny that the most perfect Spirit, viz., God, is triune are to be deemed ignorant.”²³⁰

In setting Nicholas’s reasoning into perspective, we must realize that he does not take himself to be *arguing* with a philosophical opponent. Rather, he is attempting to *render more lucid* certain doctrines to which he already subscribes on grounds not exhibited in *De Ludo Globi* itself. In other words, his symbolical illustrations, rather than aiming to be argumentative, aim to be illuminative. They are reminiscent of Anselm of Canterbury’s *De Similitudinibus* and not of his *Proslogion*. The medieval philosophical and theological tradition, from which Nicholas did not break free, placed great value on setting forth analogies,²³¹ illustrations, comparisons, parallelisms,²³² similes, metaphors, allegories, tropes, personifications,²³³ numerologies. Theologians followed Anselm of Canterbury’s rule:

I would like for us to agree to accept, in the case of God, nothing that is in even the least degree unfitting and to reject nothing that is in even the slightest degree reasonable unless something more reasonable opposes it. For in the case of God, just as an impossibility results from any unfittingness, however slight, so necessity accompanies any degree of reasonableness, however small, provided it is not overridden by some other more weighty reason.²³⁴

Like Anselm, Nicholas considers his illustrations to contain some degree of reasonableness, however slight. He relies upon his own theologico-philosophical tradition for the assurance that this degree of reasonableness is not overridden by more weighty considerations.

So in *De Ludo Globi* Nicholas is in quest of what Anselm called *rationes convenientiae* (fitting reasons) and not in quest of Anselmian *rationes necessariae* (compelling reasons). What Josef Koch says about Nicholas’s numerical symbolisms in *DC* applies generally to his symbolisms in *De Ludo Globi* and elsewhere: “Cusanus ist . . . darin noch durchaus mittelalterlicher Mensch, daß er das symbolische Denken liebt und die Feststellung symbolischer Beziehungen als Erkenntnis wertet.”²³⁵

4.2. Reflections upon the imperfect roundness of the wooden bowl-

ing-ball lead to Nicholas's discussing perfect roundness, which is the roundness of a perfect sphere. Now, a perfect sphere—which nowhere actually exists—is such that its radii are all equal. But in that case, reasons Nicholas, the radii would not be plural but would all be a single line.²³⁶ [For there cannot be two or more actually existing particulars that either are precisely equal in a particular (vs. specific or generic) respect or in every respect, thereby differing only in number or in location.]²³⁷ This single line would terminate at a single point, which would *be* the circumference, since the single line would *be* the radii. Thus, in a perfect sphere the circumference-point would be just as invisible and indivisible as would be the center-point. And since these two points would be exactly alike, they would be one and the same point.²³⁸ Thus, in a perfect sphere the circumference-point is “contained in” the center-point—or, alternatively expressed, the circumference-point is the same thing as the center-point, since a point within a point is but a single point.

Like the true roundness of a perfect sphere, the universe's roundness, being a close image of true roundness, is also invisible. For the universe's circumference, since it is so very round, consists of a succession of quantitative atoms. An atom, says Nicholas in *De Mente* 9, “is a quantity that, because of its smallness, is actually indivisible.”²³⁹ That is, an atom is something that cannot actually be further divided, in spite of the fact that further division of it is conceivable. Being so very small, an atom is invisible to the eye. Now, just as a perfect sphere would have a perfectly round circumference that would consist of *non-quantitative* points each of which would really be only one and the same point, so the universe (a close image of a perfect sphere) has a physical circumference that consists of minuscule *quantitative* units, or atoms, each of which is invisible but each of which is distinct and is of a different indivisibly minuscule quantity from the others. Since these atoms cannot be seen, the universe's circumference, or roundness, cannot be seen—neither from within the universe nor from outside the universe. “If it were possible,” says John, “for someone to be situated outside the world, the world [as such] would be invisible to him, after the fashion of an indivisible point.”²⁴⁰ Here Nicholas agrees with John. But the statement of John's with which Nicholas agrees has not always been rightly understood by interpreters. For the statement means that someone situated outside the uni-

verse would not see the universe's *roundness* but would see the round planetary bodies and the other bodies contained within the universe. As for the *universe's* roundness, it is detectible only conceptually, never empirically, inasmuch as the physical form of the universe's nearly perfect roundness consists only of invisible atoms. The fact that Nicholas does not mean that someone situated outside the universe would see nothing at all of the universe, not even its contents, is clear from his and John's later exchange:

John: Given that the roundness of the world exists in matter and since because of the roundness's association with matter it is [only] the image of [true] roundness, why can't that image-of-roundness in matter be seen?

Cardinal: That image-of-roundness resembles true roundness to such an extent that it is hidden from sight and from all the other senses.

John: And so, we do not see the world except insofar as we see the forms of things, though never all at once. If these forms were removed, then we would not see either the world or its form.²⁴¹

Here it is clearly the case that Nicholas means to be distinguishing between the universe's own form and the forms of the things present within the universe: it is the universe's form that is invisible, not the forms of the things within the universe. The universe's form is the universe's roundness, invisible to sight.

A corresponding misinterpretation has plagued Nicholas's statement that "the world (than which there exists no greater quantity) is contained in a point (than which there is nothing smaller)."²⁴² Here Nicholas is not making the fantastic claim that the universe—like a perfect, and therefore actually non-existent, sphere—is such that its physical circumference is *identical with* its physical center or that the physical center and the physical circumference *coincide* or that the plurality-of-things as seen from within the universe is but a oneness-of-things when seen from outside the universe or that the whole of the material universe is contained in an immaterial point. Instead, he is making a claim about our conceptualizing: because the universe's form is invisible "after the fashion of a point," we can conceive of the universe's outermost atoms as if they were points—and, therefore, as if they were a single point, since "in a plurality of atoms there is only one and the same point, even as in a plurality of things white there is only one whiteness."²⁴³ And when we do thus conceive of the universe, we will be agreeing (says Nicholas) with Pseudo-Hermes Trismegistus, who affirms (in Nicholas's words) that "the world is not

visible in and of itself, because it is round and because nothing of it or in it is seen *except the forms-of-things that are contained in it.*"²⁴⁴ Because in all the successive atoms of the universe's circumference there is but a single point,²⁴⁵ the universe's roundness may be said to consist of a single point. But this way of conceiving of the universe's circumference takes nothing away from the fact that the universe's physical circumference consists of *quantitative* (i.e., physical) units (viz., atoms). Accordingly, Nicholas can declare: "with respect to the roundness-of-the-world, that which offers itself to sight is an atom."²⁴⁶ And, of course, an atom offers itself invisibly to sight.

In last analysis, then: according to Nicholas the universe's roundness is a close image of roundness itself; and the roundness of round objects within the universe is an image of the universe's roundness, of which these round objects partake (since they do not partake of roundness itself).²⁴⁷

4.3. Roundness itself is true roundness, which is roundness present as an archetype in the Mind of God and present ectypally in the human mind as a concept. In other words, roundness itself is absolute and archetypal roundness, which Nicholas now identifies with eternity. Eternity, he says, may be symbolized as a circle, inasmuch as a circle has neither a definite beginning-point nor a definite end-point, since any of its points can be viewed as both beginning-point and end-point. Since a circle is a symbolical image of eternity, the universe's circular shape, i.e., the universe's roundness, can also be regarded as an image of eternity. Nicholas is, therefore, willing to speak of the universe as *eternal*, by which he means *perpetual*. That which is perpetual has a beginning but has no end. In the case of the universe, the beginning is not a beginning in time but is, rather, a beginning together with time's beginning. For both the universe and time derive conjointly from God's Creating Eternity, teaches Nicholas. The two are not, however, co-equal:

Time is called eternal because it flows from Eternity. Similarly, the world is also eternal because it is derived from Eternity and not from time. But it befits the world, more than it befits time, to be given the name *eternal*, since the duration of the world does not depend on time. For if the motion of the heavens and if time (which is the measure of motion) were to cease, there would not cease to be a world. On the other hand, if the world were completely to perish, time would cease. Therefore, it befits the world, more than it befits time, that it be called eternal.²⁴⁸

Although Nicholas is prepared to refer to the world as eternal, he wants it clearly understood that the “eternity” of the world is not identical with God’s “eternal Eternity,” which is Eternity *per se*. The world’s eternity is a derived eternity, is “eternity” only in an extended and secondary sense. Under the influence of Augustine’s *Confessions*, Book Eleven, Nicholas maintains that there never was a *time* when the universe did not exist; in that sense it has always existed and always will exist: it exists for all time. However, as was stated, it does not exist as beginningless; for only God exists *a se*.

One reason that Nicholas refers to time as eternal has to do with Baruch 3:32, which, in the Vulgate, uses the words “... *qui prae-paravit terram in aeterno tempore* ...” Once we become aware that by “world’s eternity” Nicholas means “world’s perpetuity,” no confusion arises by his use of the former expression. However, his referring to God as “Eternity-of-world”²⁴⁹ and as “Creating-Eternity-of-world,”²⁵⁰ may well conduce to real confusion in a reader’s mind—simply because the reader may not immediately recognize that these epithets are meant to designate God. One must be on guard when it comes to Nicholas’s terminology, since his usage shifts with the context—sometimes as is normally to be expected, sometimes more cryptically. Thus, a phrase such as “*anima mundi*” is sometimes just a substitute for “*natura*,”²⁵¹ at other times “*anima mundi*” signifies God.²⁵² Similarly, “*absoluta possibilitas*” in some contexts is used to refer to God but in others is used to refer to prime matter.²⁵³ And “*posse fieri*” sometimes refers to prime matter²⁵⁴ but sometimes is a shorthand for “*absolutum posse fieri*” and has reference to God the Father.²⁵⁵ Not every phrase that contains the adjective “*absolutus, -a, -um*” signifies God. For example, “*absoluta humanitas*” can mean “the form of human nature, considered in and of itself, apart from any particular individual”; on the other hand, it can be used as a name for God, much as at *De Visione Dei* 9 (36:3-5) Nicholas uses “*homo absolutus*” to refer to God. Although Nicholas says that God alone is Absolute and Uncontracted,²⁵⁶ nonetheless he does not hesitate to refer to Him as Uncontractible Contraction.²⁵⁷ Although God is *ens entis*, He is also *non-ens non-entis*.²⁵⁸ Yet, Nicholas’s reference to *ens* and *ens ipsum* and *unum ens* in *LG II* (87) is a reference not to God but to the universe—a fact that has eluded some otherwise keen interpreters.²⁵⁹

4.4. Nicholas goes on in *De Ludo Globi* to consider various theo-

logical issues (God as Tricausal; Christ as the Hypostatic Union of the Divine Nature with a human nature; man as incapable of happiness apart from his relationship to God through Christ). At the end of the dialogue he introduces another elaborate metaphor: viz., that of God as Minter of coins, i.e., as Creator of values. The discussion of value is as much theological as it is philosophical. For it focuses not only on the relationship between God (the Minter) and the human intellect (the banker) but also upon the relationship between the Divine Father and the Divine Son: “The Minter’s Face and Name and the Figure-of-His-substance and His Son are the same thing. Therefore, the Son is the Father’s Living Image and is the Figure of the Father’s substance and is the Father’s Splendor. Through the Son the Father-Minter makes, or mints, or places, His sign upon all things.”²⁶⁰ Throughout the dialogue Nicholas intermingles the theological and the philosophical, now citing Scripture, now alluding to Aristotle. From Aristotle he accepts the view that God moves the world through being the Immutable Good, which is desired and sought by all things.²⁶¹ From Aristotle he appropriates both (1) the thesis that “beginnings are minimal in quantity and maximal in power”²⁶² and (2) the doctrine that the vegetative and perceptual powers are present in the intellective power.²⁶³ Yet, he repudiates the Aristotelian theory of projectile motion, opting instead for John Buridan’s theory of impetus.

It is true that *De Ludo Globi* consists of a loose assortment of themes. But the work must not for that reason be judged to be a failed attempt at *Grundontologie*; rather, it must be seen as a fruitful effort to show that even the common man, making use of the natural light of his mind in relation to ordinary experiences, can ferret out metaphysical truths. Viewed in this manner, *De Ludo Globi* is recognized to be a continuation of Nicholas’s lauding of the *idiotia*, the formally unschooled man, the oftentimes illiterate man, who nonetheless is alert enough and acute enough to hearken to the voice of wisdom when it “proclaims [itself] openly in the streets.”²⁶⁴ Through the aid of disclosing-illustrations such as that of the bowling-game or that of the minter, even fifteen-year-old Albert IV, Nicholas’s discussant in Book Two, can arrive quickly and easily at deep truths, supposes Nicholas. With the writing of *De Ludo Globi* Nicholas takes a step forward in the direction of Modernity, in the direction of Descartes and Descartes’ aim to make philosophy accessible to those of his countrymen who

were able, at least, to read his vernacular writings. In taking the step toward Descartes, Nicholas at the same time is moving away from Moses Maimonides and Maimonides' desire to preserve the domain of metaphysics as an esoteric domain—his desire to ward off the common man, lest the recondite nature of metaphysical truths further confuse his untrained mind.²⁶⁵

De Ludo Globi, one of Nicholas's latest works, reverts "more explicitly" to the method of the early work *De Coniecturis*—i.e., to the diagrammatic method, which seeks out *figurarum manuductio*. The words "more explicitly" are important because they remind us that Nicholas never abandoned this early method, glimpses of which are seen already in *De Docta Ignorantia*. Far from dispensing with *figurarum manuductio* (guidance from diagrams), Nicholas continued to rely on it and to provide it in works of his that intervened between *De Coniecturis* and *De Ludo Globi*—in particular, in the symbolical images appealed to in *De Visione Dei*, *De Beryllo*, and *De Possess*. By proceeding in this way, Nicholas—had he wanted to—could have paraphrased the Apostle: 'When I was a child I spoke as does a child, I understood as does a child, I thought as does a child. But when I became a man, I put away childish things and learned to think symbolically and sought to devise games the playing of which would have symbolic meaning.'

5. Cusanus as Religious Metaphysician: Presuppositionalism.

Interpreters of Cusanus have long recognized that he nowhere pursues, as did the Scholastics, rigorous proofs of God's existence. Nowhere, for example, does he take over Thomas's *quinque viae* or Scotus's *concatenatio multorum argumentorum* in order either to endorse them or to revise them. And yet, he does advance reasons for believing that God exists—reasons that Rudolf Haubst can speak of as belonging to the "*Grundstock der 'natürlichen Theologik'*" (the "foundation of 'natural theology'").²⁶⁶ And Klaus Kremer writes:

To be sure, there is not lacking in Cusa's work rational considerations that understand the world as pointing toward God, i.e., rational considerations that make clear that we can seek and find God only by means of the world—make clear, indeed, that for us God is really *someone to be sought*. But these observations [by Nicholas] are not meant to articulate a starting point for constructing a proof of God's existence in the sense of Thomas's Five Ways Thus, Cusa does not hold the view that a knowledge of determinate fea-

tures concerning the world, i.e., concerning creatures, leads us to a knowledge of God; on the contrary, he believes that a knowledge of God is the presupposition for a knowledge of the universe.²⁶⁷

So while not exactly disagreeing with Haubst, Kremer nonetheless wants to give more weight to, or at least more attention to, what he rightly sees to be Cusa's "*apriorischen Weg zur Gotteserkenntnis*."²⁶⁸ Let us examine, briefly, Cusa's relation to both *die natürliche Theologik* and *der apriorische Weg*.

5.1. If natural theology is the program of making inferences about God's existence and essence from considerations drawn from the workings of nature, i.e., of the universe, then Nicholas's philosophy contains the rudiments of natural theology. Nicholas concedes as much when in *De Possess* he acknowledges the validity of the Apostle Paul's claim that "the invisible things of God, including His eternal power and divinity, are clearly seen from the creation of the world, by means of understanding created things."²⁶⁹ In interpreting this verse, Nicholas states unequivocally: "The manifestation of God occurs from the creation of the world."²⁷⁰ After all, the Psalmist, too, had written: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows His handiwork"²⁷¹ and "The fool has said in his heart 'there is no God.'"²⁷² Nicholas would no more have denied the Psalmist's assertions than he would have denied the Apostle's claim. Accordingly, he can write in *De Venatione Sapientiae* 12 (31:8-10): "All things, because they exist, bear witness of God that He exists. Or better: because God exists, all other things exist."²⁷³ In his *Sermo XX* (5:5-11) he evidences his commitment to natural theology in the traditional sense: together with Pseudo-Dionysius, he agrees that "we ascend unto God ... from things visible, e.g., from things caused. And according to Augustine this [ascent occurs] by means of multiple considerations: (1) either because it is not the case that anything has produced itself or (2) because from what is movable we must come [inferentially] to the Unmovable, (3) from the imperfect we must come to the Perfect, (4) from the good we must come to the Best, and so on." Yet, the question arises: 'Granted that Nicholas is sympathetic to natural theology, does he himself make any substantive use of it?' And the correct answer is twofold: 'Yes, when it comes to symbolically identifying, in accordance with the *via positiva*, what God is; but No, when it comes to establishing that God is.' Let us explore the 'No' answer now, the

‘Yes’ answer in section 5.3.

5.1.1. Nicholas does maintain that the existence and nature of the world and its contents provide *evidence* for the existence of God. However, he himself never develops that evidence systematically, never works it into a full-blown and tightly-reasoned argument. In *De Posseset*, for example, his appeal to empirical data is flimsy: “I know that what I see perceptibly does not exist from itself.... Therefore, when in seeing what is perceptible I understand that it exists from a higher power (since it is finite, and a finite thing cannot exist from itself; for how could what is finite have set its own limit?), then I can only regard as invisible and eternal [this] Power from which it exists.”²⁷⁴ All the intricacies of the cosmological argument, and the objections to it, are here glossed over, so that although we can here speak of Nicholas’s *rationaly reflecting*, we cannot speak of his *arguing* or of his presenting an *argument*. A similar point holds true regarding his line-of-thought in *De Docta Ignorantia* I, 6; *De Principio* 2-6; *Cribratio Alkorani* II, 2 (90); *Sermo XXII* (8-9); and *Sermo XXXVIII* (11:5 - 12:19): viz., that the reasoning is tenuous and does not constitute natural theology in any robust sense, even though inferences are indeed made from the world to God. Not to be overlooked is the fact that these inferences are made in conjunction with certain *a priori* metaphysical assumptions, such as that whatever “is divisible²⁷⁵ cannot exist *per se*”²⁷⁶ and that whatever “could exist otherwise than it now does ... does not exist from itself.”²⁷⁷ These explicit *a priori* assumptions detract from our calling Nicholas’s reasoning natural theology, even though, traditionally, natural theology was never altogether free of recourse to theoretical principles. It makes use, for example, of such principles as that every event has a cause and that similar causes always produce similar effects. These are not empirical generalizations, for they are appealed to in justifying contrary-to-fact conditional judgments. But are they laws of nature, or are they methodological rules, or just what?

5.1.2. So although Nicholas respects and accepts natural theology’s strategies for proving the existence of God, he himself does not expand upon that approach. Rather, his own emphatic inference to God’s existence proceeds along lines that are more conceptual than empirical. This fact comes out strikingly in his extended reasoning in *Sermo XXIII* (15:7 - 17:15):

Let anyone imagine (1) that he is Adam and (2) that through being born he alone has entered into the world and views this world. Looking upon all things—the heavens, the stars, the earth, the waters—he first of all conceives the multitude of beings. Secondly, when he sees their diversity of magnitude, he conceives of inequality. Thirdly, when he sees the stars above and the earth below, east and west, south and north, and any two things located in different places, he conceives of separation.²⁷⁸

And so, he knows of multitude, from which there arises inequality; for from one thing and another thing inequality arises. Now, one thing and another thing are a multitude. Therefore, inequality presupposes multitude, from which it is begotten. But from multitude and inequality there arises separation; for a multitude of unequal things is, necessarily, [such that the things are] separated. No one is so simple that he does not see these points clearly.

Moreover, multitude does not exist from itself but exists from oneness. (For multitude derives from oneness, for it is multitude by virtue of the fact that it is not oneness once, or one-ly, but is oneness pluralized). Therefore, you see sufficiently that multitude derives from what is one and that multitude itself does not exist in the absence of oneness. For if oneness were removed, nothing further would remain as regards multitude. Therefore, whatever multitude *is*, it *is* from oneness, which exists as a whole in the whole of multitude and in each part of it; and in the oneness multitude itself is present.

Thereafter, he considers how it is that inequality derives from equality. For whoever speaks of the unequal speaks antecedently of the equal, from which the unequal derives. And so, every inequality has antecedently an equality to which it is reduced. Therefore, inequality has being only from equality, from which it derives and to which it is related as multitude is related to oneness.

Next, separation presupposes union,²⁷⁹ even as multitude presupposes oneness and as inequality presupposes equality. Therefore, you see that the world is originated and that just as what is originated is multiple, unequal, and separated, so its beginning is one, equal, and unified. And so, you see that the First Beginning is *Oneness*, *Equality*, and *Union*, without which there could not be the beginning of the originated *multiple*, *unequal*, and *separated*. And since multitude derives from oneness, Oneness is, so to speak, the Father of many nations; and Equality can rightly be called the Son of Oneness, for equality arises only from oneness; and Union is called the Holy Spirit.

This reasoning scarcely qualifies as natural theology, which is largely empirical; indeed, the foregoing reasoning is more akin to that which is often called rational theology. In Nicholas's case, the rational theology is associated with his Christian Neoplatonist modes of thought, modes that render it plausible to regard Oneness, as

τὸ αὐθυπόστατον, as that which is Self-Existent, that whose very Essence is to exist and to exist triunely.

5.2. Nicholas's overriding preference is for *a priori* theology and for a kind of presuppositionalism. We see instances of this fact throughout his writings. In *De Pace Fidei* 4 (10-11) he moves from observing men's love of wisdom to inferring that lovers of wisdom presuppose the existence of wisdom, which he goes on to identify with God. But, of course, an opponent could dispute the identification of wisdom with Wisdom-qua-God and could consistently deny detecting any manifestation of Divine Wisdom in the universe.

5.2.1. Another example of Nicholas's *a priori* presuppositionalism, an example somewhat reminiscent of Anselm's argument in *Monologion* 18 and in *De Veritate* 1, is found in *Sermo* CCIV (3:1-11). There a proposition's being true is presumed to presuppose the existence of truth; and truth is identified with Truth-qua-God, which is said to be Absolute Necessity. Most interesting of all, however, is Nicholas's presuppositionalism in *De Apice Theoriae* 12-13: "Since every question about what is possible presupposes Possibility, doubt cannot be entertained about Possibility. For doubt does not pertain to Possibility. For whoever would question whether Possibility exists sees as soon as he thinks about it that the question is not germane, since without Possibility no question could be posed about Possibility. Still less can one ask whether Possibility is this or that, since the possibility-of-existing and the possibility of being this or that presuppose Possibility itself. And so, it is evident that Possibility itself precedes all doubt that can be entertained. Therefore, nothing is more certain than is Possibility itself, since [any] doubt [about it] can only presuppose it, since nothing more sufficient or more perfect than it can be thought."²⁸⁰ According to Nicholas's outlook, then, the existence of Possibility is indubitable; and, as expected, he identifies Possibility itself with God, since there cannot possibly be anything ontologically prior to Possibility.

5.2.2. Unlike in *De Apice Theoriae*, where Nicholas argues for the *existence* of God (on the basis of our having to presuppose Absolute Possibility's existence in the very course of doubting its existence), the presupposings of *De Coniecturis* I, 5 (20) and *De Sapientia* II (29-33) have to do not with arguing for God's existence but only with discourse about His nature, or essence. Thus, the passage in *De Coniec-*

turis concerns the *via positiva* and what can intelligibly be said of God. Can we say of God meaningfully that He *is*, that He *exists*? Can we meaningfully call Him a Nature, viz., the Divine Nature? And so on. Nicholas adopts the rule that, in accordance with the *via positiva*, we may legitimately and intelligibly refer to God—to be sure, symbolically—by the predicate that is *presupposed by our question*. If we ask, “Does God exist?” then since the question presupposes *existence*, we may reply that God exists and is Existence, i.e., Being. If we ask, “What is God?” then since the question presupposes *quiddity*, we may reply that God is Quiddity. If we ask, “Is God wise?” then since the question presupposes wisdom, we may respond that God is Wisdom. A similar viewpoint is adopted in *De Sapientia* II, where God is called “the Absolute Presupposition of all things that are in any way presupposed.”²⁸¹ And Nicholas makes clear that in *De Sapientia* II presuppositionalism belongs to *theologia sermocinalis* (locutional theology), which is, simply, the *via positiva*: “If I am to disclose to you the concept that I have of God, then if my locution is to be of help to you, it must be such that its words are significative—so that in this way I can lead you (through the meaning-of-the-word which is known to us both) unto what is sought. Now, it is God who is being sought. Hence, this is locutional theology, by which I am endeavoring to lead you unto God—in the easiest and truest way I can—through the meaning of a word.”²⁸²

5.3. So when Nicholas discusses the *via positiva*, he relies on his method of presupposition in order to determine which predicates are appropriate to his discourse about God. But he also relies upon the results of natural theology. According to these results God is Supreme Being, Supreme Cause, Supreme Intelligence, Supreme Mover, Supreme Necessity, Supreme Perfection, etc. But unlike Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, Nicholas does not regard these names as signifying the Divine Nature analogically. Rather, for him, they have the status of metaphors that are, however, befitting:

If affirmative names befit God, they befit Him only in relation to created things. [I do] not [mean] that created things are the cause of [these names] befitting Him, for the Maximum can have nothing from created things; rather, [I mean that these names] befit Him on the basis of His infinite power in relation to created things. For God was eternally able to create, because unless He had been able, He would not have been supreme power. Therefore, although the name “Creator” befits Him in relation to created things,

it also befit Him before there was a created thing, since He was eternally able to create. The case is similar with “justice” and all the other affirmative names which we *symbolically ascribe* to God on the basis of created things because of a certain perfection signified by these names.²⁸³

5.4. In *De Mente* 15 (159:7) Nicholas uses the expression “*connata religio*”. Although some translators have taken this expression to mean simply “*unsere Religion*” (“our religion”),²⁸⁴ it means much more. For it relates to St. Paul’s observation, in Romans 1:18-32, that God is manifest to all men, some of whom, when knowing God, choose not to worship Him, so that a darkening of their hearts results. Given the teaching of St. Paul, one would expect that the theme of *connata religio* is not new with Cusanus. And this expectation is correct, for the same theme is found throughout the Middle Ages—in Pierre Abelard’s *Theologia Summi Boni* III.5, to mention just one instance. Nicholas does not limit himself to expressing the idea of *connata*, or *innata*, *religio* in but a single work. For it is alluded to again in *De Venatione Sapientiae* 12 (32:10-13): “Intellectus scire desiderat; non tamen hoc naturale desiderium eius ad sciendum quiditatem dei sui est sibi conatum [*sic*], sed ad sciendum deum suum tam magnum, quod magnitudinis eius nullus est finis”²⁸⁵ And much earlier, in *De Coniecturis* II, 15 (147:5-7), we are told: “... omnibus hominibus inest ... a natura specifica religio quaedam altiolem immortalem finem promittens”²⁸⁶ Because of the presence in men of an innate tendency toward religion and toward seeking God, each man (says Nicholas) has a desire for an immortal life; and this desire is a foretaste of Eternal Wisdom. Nicholas’s presuppositionalism has its matrix in this foretaste. That is to say, his belief that ‘any man who loves and seeks wisdom can see both (1) that the existence of Wisdom is presupposed by his pursuit and (2) that Wisdom is God’ is fostered by his belief that all men have a natural tendency to seek God and have a natural ability to recognize Him as Wisdom itself. And just as the presuppositionalism has at its basis *connata religio*, so too it has as its basis a realistic theory of universals: wisdom, truth, goodness (and the other universals) exist as exemplars in God; and whatever is present in God *is* God.²⁸⁷ These universals also exist, in a participated way, in angels and in human beings. Were we not to concede both this doctrine of metaphysical realism and the belief that all men possess, at least initially, an innate and inchoate knowledge of

God, Nicholas's presuppositionalism would lose whatever plausibility it can charitably be supposed to possess.

5.5. Although Nicholas's presuppositional theology relates more to the *via positiva* than to the *via negativa*, the latter, he says, is a truer way to speak of God than is the former.²⁸⁸ In *De Sapientia* II (32) he distinguishes a third way: not only is there the way of affirmation and the way of remotion (or negation) but there is also the transcendent way, whereby God is *supra omnem positionem et ablationem*. This third way is also mentioned in *DI* I, 4 (12), in *DC* I, 5 (21), and in Nicholas's letter of 1453 to the abbot and monks of Tegernsee.²⁸⁹ For example, according to the *via positiva* God is wise; according to the *via negativa* He is not unwise; according to the *via tertia* He is neither wise nor not-wise but altogether transcends the distinction between wise and not-wise. This latter approach is Nicholas's preferred approach for more truly discoursing about God.

Since God is beyond all affirmation *and* negation, we may not, acceptably, affirm anything of Him or deny anything of Him. And yet, paradoxically, we may also, acceptably, affirm of Him or deny of Him anything that is not unfitting. In *De Docta Ignorantia* I, 4 (12) Nicholas expresses this point as follows:

Because the absolutely Maximum is absolutely and actually all things which *can* be (and is so free of all opposition that the Minimum coincides with it), it is beyond both all affirmation and all negation. And it is not, as well as is, all that which is conceived to be; and it is, as well as is not, all that which is conceived not to be. But it is a given thing in such a way that it is all things; and it is all things in such a way that it is no thing; and it is maximally a given thing in such a way that it is it minimally.

A comparable point is made in *De Possess* 10 and 11, where Nicholas concludes by stating: "It does not matter what name you give to God, provided that in the foregoing manner you mentally remove the limits with respect to its possible being." So we can admissibly affirm that God is Motion and is moved, or we can acceptably deny that God is Motion or is moved. For God is beyond the distinction between motion and not-motion, between moved and not-moved, insofar as He is the Actuality of all possibility, i.e., is Actualized-possibility, or *Possess*.

Thus, Nicholas's terminology is quite fluid. No example of this fluidity is more striking than is his language of *coincidentia oppositorum*:

(1) God, says Nicholas, *is* the Coincidence of opposites;²⁹⁰ (2) opposites coincide *in* God;²⁹¹ and (3) God is *beyond* the coincidence of opposites.²⁹² However, Nicholas does not understand different things by these three different statements. On the contrary, he regards them as interchangeable. Accordingly, their apparent surface-meaning is not the same as their deeper true-meaning. Because God is the Coincidence of opposites, He may be called by opposing names, as in the case of Motion and Rest. Because opposites coincide in God, there is no opposition in Him, and, thus, all names to which other names are opposed may be denied of Him. Because God is beyond the coincidence of opposites, He is ineffable, and no names, whether positive or negative, at all befit Him.

All of the foregoing ideas lead Nicholas to revel in ostentatiously paradoxical utterances: God is named unnameably, is seen unseeably, is known unknowably, is comprehended incomprehensibly, is signified unsignifiably, is partaken of unpartakeably. These expressions, and others like them, arise from Nicholas's approaching God through discourse that travels along more than one of the specified three routes: the *positiva*, the *negativa*, the *supra affirmativam et negativam*. That is, the paradoxicality originates from Nicholas's assuming two or more of these routes into a single meta-level utterance. For example, when God is seen, He is seen in accordance with the *via positiva* or the *via negativa*. But according to the *via supra affirmativam et negativam*, He is unseeable. By combining these approaches, Nicholas can say that God is seen unseeably. With this manner of proceeding, he shows his alliance not only with Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite but, more proximally, with Meister Eckhart, his ingenious German predecessor.