CUSANUS THE THEOLOGIAN.¹

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I.

We are sometimes told that the fifteenth century saw the decline of scholasticism. Like all such generalizations, the statement contains a modicum of truth. It would certainly be more applicable to this century, where Wyclif had challenged the orthodox faith and had to be answered in terms which every one could understand—Netter’s Doctrinale points the way to simpler (though not less prolix) methods of exposition—than on the Continent, where, both at Paris and in the German universities, the philosophy of Occam was strongly entrenched. But alike in England and abroad, there is undoubtedly a contraction of the field of influence once belonging to the scholastic method and the theologians trained along those lines.

That contraction came in numerous ways. In the Netherlands and in many districts of Northern Germany the teaching of religion on a simple and popular basis in the Schools of the Brethren of the Common Life seemed a better preparation for the practical life of a parish clergyman than a discipline founded on the sentences and ending, perhaps, with a degree that got one nowhere. In this country the university-trained clerk was finding it very difficult to get a benefice in comparison with the less lettered protégé of the secular patron or the civil servant, and the general complaint was that the universities would soon be empty. To speak more generally, as the century advanced, the growth of education and the increasingly vocational tendency of studies like law and medicine threatened to pass the professional

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on the 10th February, 1937.

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philosophers and theologians by. And there was competition from another quarter. In Scandinavia, in England (especially East Anglia) and in parts of Germany, an emotional mysticism was claiming the attention of many who at an earlier date might have become orthodox academics or remained among the silent mortified devout. The solitary, living by rule, was coming into his or her own as the recipient of treatises or legacies; and the people were beginning to listen to other religious personalities who were by no means anchorites or recluses, as the career of Margery Kempe has made plain. Archbishop Arundel does not seem to have been angry with her, when she rebuked him for the laxity and extravagance of his household. Bishop Philip Repingdon treated her with honour. She may have been a nuisance during divine service, and people grumbled; but she was accepted, even if unwillingly, by her age. Art gives similar witness. The rich iconography of East Anglia in the fifteenth century points to something more than the stock work of a few firms of masons. There is a fine tangle of legend and fancy linked with the names of those popular saints of local devotion: St. Barbara, St. Dorothy, St. Edmund the king and martyr, St. Katherine, St. Margaret. It is the age of the women saints, when the Revelations of St. Bridget was almost the standard text-book of devotion.

Religious thought, therefore, was no longer content to dwell within the syllogism. In his earlier days, Nicholas of Cues had attributed an example of this method of proof to the working of the Holy Spirit. In his later years he would scarcely have suggested this. More than in the fourteenth century, dialogue was becoming a literary characteristic of the age; and humanism, with its emphasis on formal beauty, on the perfection of a period and the cadence of words was, as we all know, more than a little impatient with the odiosa cantio of the old disputations. On a different plane, popular devotion can be seen breaking out on all sides: in verse, in imagery (one recalls Descents from the

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1 Cf. The Register of Henry Chichele, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1414-1443, ii. 95, 380, 600, for testamentary bequests to Juliana Lampett of Norwich.

Cross or the Man of Sorrows), in practical works of mercy and piety like the endowment of hospitals, or in campaigns against unorthodoxy that might lead equally to a crusade or the foundation of a college. It was the century of legacy and insurance for the soul; and these religious currents, this world of exciting sensibility, must have alarmed quieter conservative spirits. The danger that the tides of sentiment might run uncontrolled should have been clear to any thoughtful observer about the time of the Council of Basel (1431). They had already shown what they could do in the Bohemian revolt. The problem was how to set the intellect free to serve the cause of religion without the academic contortions that served to alienate rather than attract. At the same time, as Gascoigne realized when he urged the need of preaching, religion, if it is to be vital, must be a force leading to action, to practical goodness before any intellectual enjoyment. It must move people to be better and more steadfast. This was the more necessary amid the bourgeois civilization of the fifteenth century. The opulent and comfortable life of the upper citizens needed some antidote to the pageants of its worship as well as of its secular ceremonies.

It can be seen, then, that the Church of the fifteenth century had to provide, apart from the elegant and fastidious prosodists, for two unlikely opposites, the visionary and the city magnate. The problem was not really new; but now the necessity was upon her at a time when she herself stood deeply in need of internal strictness and missionary ardour, and was in danger of losing her power of instructing and illuminating her children. Her weapon in this educational task had been the very discipline that had lost its freshness and compelling power. This is not the time or place to venture any observations on the contribution made by the scholastic method to the cause of accurate thinking and the precise use of terms. Every trained intellect of whatever rank in learned or administrative Christendom had been brought up in it, or had some contact with it, and its influence was everywhere. Confronted with the new emotionalism, what was it to do? To those consciously or unconsciously in search of self-expression or seeking literary perfection, the laborious and often unremunerative toil of the schoolmen held out little attraction.
It was simpler to write homilies or pious meditations than a *quodlibet*, even if the scholastic terminology came almost as second nature. By this one need not be suspected of any allusion to the work of pure and gracious minds like the author of the *Imitatio*, a classic in any age or generation: but to those writers, often in the vernacular, whose work is more enlightening to the philologist or to the student of behaviour than to critics who inquire whether they are leading or what serious contribution they are making towards the philosophy of religion.

It fell to Nicholas of Cues to restore—or attempt to restore,—the balance of reason and emotion by weighting once more the scale of reason, while at the same time demonstrating the limitations of the rational method. To do this, he went back to Neo-Platonic sources; but he is also a son of Master Eckhart, subllest of German mystics, from whom he derived some of his terminology and a great part of his attitude towards ultimate reality. So much has been written round his career that I need not attempt any biographical sketch. It is rather the sequence of his works and the environment in which he wrote them that should claim our attention here. Nicholas is an instance of a man whose most important work was his first serious essay in metaphysic. All the rest—and there is much of it—is a development of the ideas expressed in that treatise, until he had created his own system—the Cusan dialectic, we might call it—by building round its central conception, the notion of the one, changeless and transcendent deity, the structure of a finite universe.

subject to variation and mutability. In his early university years at Heidelberg he was in the town of the Occamist Marsilius of Inghen, the home of scholasticism; but at Padua when he took his degree in Canon law, the young lawyer was brought face to face with men and influences that left a permanent mark upon him. The mathematicians and the doctors, the latter Averroists, gathered there formed a brilliant and powerful teaching staff. Prosdocimo de' Beldomandi and Paolo del Pozzo Toscanelli must have introduced him to the Pythagorean doctrines so plainly reflected in his works. From them and from the Arabian traditions preserved by the medicals he may have learned the meaning of causation, and have become acquainted with the notion of law in nature, which, however paradoxical it may sound, underlay the astrology for which Northern Italy was famous. His great interest in Islam that comes out in the De pace fidei and the Cribrationis Alchoran, and in his respect for Avicenna, may well have been derived from his Paduan masters, not least perhaps from Ugo Benzi of Siena. "Ses vrais maîtres en philosophie, ce n'est pas à Padoue qu'il les faut chercher," M. Vansteenberghe has remarked. This is perhaps a little hard on the Italian mathematicians, who worked deeply upon Nicholas's subtle and active intellect.

The pamphlet (1436) on the Reform of the Calendar may seem the only example of Nicholas's work that appears at all isolated from the rest. This impression will quickly disappear when the astronomical calculations are arrived at. Though the first of his mathematical works was not issued till 1450, it is clear, even in the Concordantia Catholica (1433, the first major treatise, but none the less, an œuvre de circonstance) that the Paduan leaven was early at work. In the De docta ignorantia the mathematical influence is absolutely clear; indeed, the

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1 Cf. Apologia doctae ignorantiae, in Opera, p. 67. This is not to imply that he agreed in any way with Mohammedan theology.
3 Opera, p. 1157 f. The treatise contains a striking little historical survey of early chronological systems.
4 Cf. especially the terms which he uses to describe the supreme agreement in God; Opera, p. 693.
5 E.g. I. ii, x, xiii-xv, xxi, xxiii; II. i, v; Opera, pp. 3-7, 9-11, 16-17, 18, 22-24, 29-30.
notion of mathematical truth lies at the heart of the argument. Let us state his position in the words of the theological appendix to his *De Mathematicis Complementis*, which he dedicated to Nicholas V. The Pope, while pleased with the learned mathematical treatise, had expressed a little astonishment at the pre-occupation of so leading an ecclesiastic with geometry and numbers, and Nicholas wrote to show him the logical implication of it all. True, the passage to be quoted was written thirty years after Nicholas’s student days at Padua, but it reveals, as clearly as any other like quotation from his works, whither those early studies had led him:—

Every one knows that in mathematics truth can be more surely reached than in the other liberal arts; and therefore we see those who taste the discipline of geometry remaining faithful to it in a remarkable love, as if a kind of food for the intellectual life is contained there more purely and simply [than elsewhere]; for the Geometrician does not care for lines or figures of bronze or gold or wood; he cares for the lines and figures as they are in themselves, although they are not found outside the substances. He beholds, therefore, with the eye of sense figures of the sensible world, in order that with the eye of the mind he may be able to behold the figures of the mind. Nor does the mind see the mental figures any the less truly than does the eye the sensible figures; but rather all the more truly, inasmuch as the mind beholds the figures in themselves, freed from material otherness (*alteritate*). But ordinary physical perception (*sensus exterior*) cannot teach them without that otherness; for the figure acquires otherness from its union with the material substance, which varies and varies: an account of which there is one triangle on this pavement and another on the wall, and the figure is truer on the one than on the other; and so under such conditions it always falls short of a higher degree of truth and precision. But mental perception in the abstract will see the figures free from all variable otherness; since the mind discovers itself when the otherness of the senses is not there to impede it.¹

A Cartesian beginning, if we may take the first sentence to represent Nicholas’s own experience. He remained faithful, indeed, to his geometry. Throughout his works there are passages contrasting the truth of mental perception with the conjectural “otherness” of sense-data. From a comparatively early period Nicholas must have been filled with the desire to pass beyond conjecture to the perception of eternal reality.

¹ *Opera*, p. 1107.
Sensible things, he would argue, can never be precisely equal: there can only be approximate likeness. But the ideal quantities of the mathematician can be exactly alike, precisely because they are abstractions. In mathematical symbols precise and final truth can be attained. To put it in another way: truth, he observes in one passage, is *adaequatio rei et intellectus*. The problem of knowledge is how to bring about the assimilation. "Knowledge comes through likeness"; but in the finite world of sense-perceptions, real likeness is impossible. And how is the desired abstraction, reality, to be arrived at, when we are, so to speak, the prisoners of our own senses, the victims of *alteritas*? By what mental effort can mathematical certainty be brought into the service of philosophy? That is the question in its modern form.

There may be something fanciful in attributing so large a problem to the mind of Nicholas in the early days, when he was in Cardinal Orsini's household, hunting for classical manuscripts in Germany, or, later, winning his spurs over the Bohemians at the Council of Basel. The evidence for his mental growth before 1440 is slender; but the notions of equality and difference, of mutability and changelessness, and above all the concept of unity, to which he was always returning, did not come from the authors whom he cites in the mature treatises alone. Yet it was undoubtedly John the Scot that enabled Nicholas to ponder more deeply the philosophical implication of mathematical truth, and gave him the notion of the timeless, transcendent being, combining possibility and actuality, the being opposed to all alterity, eternally the same; and how deeply Nicholas had studied him both his early and his later commentators, especially Dr. Klibansky, have made plain. But Nicholas the theologian, as he stands to later ages, is compounded of something more besides. There is personal devotion, of the deepest and humblest kind, to the object of contemplation; and there is the mystic's language describing his approach to that ultimate reality, the use of analogy and symbol in which Eckhart was the instructor. If we are merely to attribute to Nicholas the negative theology of

1 In the Compendium, *Opera*, p. 247.
the Scot, we should miss an important positive element in his Christology: the doctrine of the Word as the mediator between the Creator and the human objects of his creation. One element of greatness in the Cusan is that he is able to bring together a being which he describes as absolutely greatest, and the concrete individual, without that individual losing his identity. He had to face the insistent problem of personality that besets the theologian of idealist leanings.⁴ What does the Absolute care for the individuals whom it comprises? Does not the tremendous singleness of God obliterate, in its unity, all those differences which to our finite minds are so precious? To the solution of these questions Nicholas brought a warmth of feeling that we are not always prone to expect in a writer who covers his pages with geometrical figures and diagrams.

But we are anticipating: for we left Nicholas at the critical point of transmuting mathematics into philosophy. This was the task of the busiest period of his life, from 1437 or thereabouts (the time when he left the Conciliar party for the Papal side, along with Cesarini), to 1453. Its landmarks are his leading work, the *De docta ignorantia*, and the *De conjecturis*, both of 1440; his vigorous support, in sermons and addresses, of the Papal interest and his propaganda against German neutrality in the Council; and his return, after that neutrality had been conquered by Aeneas Sylvius and Eugenius IV, to Italy, a Cardinal for his pains: to Italy and—be it noted—to mathematics. To 1450 belong the *De transmutationibus geometricis*; the *De arithmeticis complementis*; and (his favourite theme), *De quadratura circuli*. The more mystical *De quaerendo Deum* was written while he was conducting the campaign against German neutrality (1445). 1451 and part of 1452 were occupied with his famous tour of his native land as Papal legate. To 1452 belongs the *Conjectura de ultimis diebus*. It was 1453 that saw Cusanus, now bishop of Brixen, enter upon a quarrel with Duke

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1 Nicholas looked at this problem more in the light of the ascent of man towards God. How can the finite man establish any contact with the divine Essence? It is the human being who has to approach the God who beholds him, and by intuition (which he describes in the *De visione Dei*) to arrive, through the darkness, at his essence.
Sigismund of the Tyrol over the reform which he was attempting to impose upon the aristocratic nunnery of the Sonnenburg: a conflict which was to divide the local nobility, and ultimately to involve forces outside the immediate sphere of the disputants. Yet it was to 1453 that three works of serene imaginative power belong. The _De Visione Dei, De mathematicis complementis_ and the _De pace fidei_. In the former he produced a work of devotion as well as of philosophical importance, wherein the novelty and paradox of the standpoint alone prevents it from ranking with the work of Thomas of Kempen. The astonishing fact about this period of legatine and diocesan work and activity in the life of Nicholas is the output of pure speculation amid all the disturbance that was going on about him.

After 1453 there is a gap. The conflict with Sigismund increased, and reached its climax in 1456-1457. None the less, in 1458 and 1460 came three works, _De Beryllo, De mathematica perfectione_, and, most characteristic of all, _De possest_. The latter and the _De non aliud_ of 1462 are concerned most of all with the doctrine of God and his relation with the universe. They are his maturest theological works. I would quote here Dr. Bett’s summary of his position:

He began with a conception of God as the super-essential unity, which is opposed to no otherness, and in which all contraries coincide. He never really departed from that position. But he came more and more in later life to use phrases which stress the self-identity of the Godhead. God is _idem_, for unity, infinity, actuality, possibility, existence, nothingness, all that can be thought, all that surpasses thought, is the same in Him. He is _Non aliud_, for there is nothing to which He is other, since He is unrelated and unconditioned and absolute. He is the Possesst, because in Him possibility (_posses_) and actuality (_est_) are one. It can hardly be said that there is any real advance in thought here; the notion of the changeless identity of the Deity is really involved in the conception, found in Nicholas’s earliest books of God as immutable Unity. But Nicholas came, in later life, to use new terms which stress the internal identity, so to speak, rather than the universal inclusiveness of the Absolute, and at the same time he came to emphasise the dynamic rather than the static aspect of the conception.¹

In 1461, bitterly attacked by Gregory of Heimburg, with the Tyrolean dispute now assuming almost European proportions, ¹ _Nicholas of Cusa_, pp. 109-110.
Cusanus went to Rome. In the last two years of his life, no less than four treatises came from his pen. In the final one, the *De apice theoriae*, he has given a little picture of himself which we may place alongside of the kneeling figure on Andrea Bregno's tomb in S. Pietro in Vincoli. The *De apice theoriae* is the report of a little conversation of the Cardinal with Peter of Erkelenz, his secretary. Peter observes that he has often seen his master so deeply sunk in meditation that he has not dared to disturb him. But now, finding him a little more relaxed and in less spiritual tension, he feels that he can make the venture, and ask the Cardinal what he has been contemplating. The Cardinal expresses satisfaction: he has often been surprised that Peter has never asked him what he was thinking about; but now that his secretary has been ordained priest, it is right that he should ask to know. Peter replies that he has scrupled to ask because of his inexperience; but, he adds ingenuously, "I thought that you had reached the end of speculation in your many various books." Cusanus replies that if the apostle Paul, wrapt up into the third heaven, did not comprehend the incomprehensible, no one would ever be satiated by what surpasses all comprehension, but would ever try to comprehend the better. Then this exchange:—

**Peter.** What are you seeking?

**Cardinal.** You say rightly.

**Peter.** I ask you and you make fun of me. I ask you to say what you are seeking, and you answer "You say rightly." I was making no statement, only asking.

**Cardinal.** If you say "what are you seeking?" you have spoken rightly: since I am seeking something. Who ever seeks, seeks somewhat. If he was not in search of anything, he certainly would not be seeking at all. Like all men given up to study, I am seeking something; for I earnestly long to know what is the nature and essence of the thing so eagerly sought.

**Peter.** Do you think that it can be found?

**Cardinal.** Certainly it can; for the impulse (motus) which all scholars have is not in vain.

**Peter.** If so far no one has found it, why beyond all others do you try?

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1 Opera, pp. 332-337.
2 II. Cor. xii. 2. St. Paul only says that he heard words which he may not repeat.
Cardinal. I think that many people have seen it and have written about their vision. For the essence of it, which has always been sought, is being sought for now and will ever be; if it was utterly unknown, how should it be sought? When found, how should it remain unknown? Therefore a philosopher said that it is seen by all, though from afar.

It recalls La Saisiaz, if only for the contrast in outlook:—

I have questioned and am answered. Question, answer presuppose
Two points, that the thing itself which questions answers, is, it knows;
As it also knows the thing perceived outside itself,—a force
Actual ere its own beginning, operative through its course,
Unaffected by its end,—that this thing likewise needs must be:
Call this—God, then, call that—Soul, and both—the only facts for me.

Browning's emphasis lay on the reality of the soul, the creature. Nicholas's on the reality of the object sought, the being "beyond all cognitive power and anterior to all variety and opposition"; which was not "now one, now another, but the hypostasis [the underlying nature] of all." His works are one long act of contemplating this being as it manifested itself in possibility and actuality, posse and esse, at one and the same time.

II.

First, the attitude of the seeker towards the object sought. Nicholas speaks of truth or reality as inattingibilis, not to be attained. Is our reason capable of attaining it?

The answer that Nicholas would give is that we must realize our own limitations. All research proceeds by comparison. The infinite, because by definition it cannot be measured by anything, remains necessarily unknown. Knowledge or understanding of our native incapacity compared with the knowledge that is God's he terms "learned ignorance," sometimes "holy ignorance." This ignorantia has certain consequences: the man who has it will attach very little importance to the affirmations which we commonly make about God; for all the name-
that we attribute to him, all that we affirm of him, are only "in respect of his creatures": they attach to him some quality which his creatures possess. Nicholas’s first philosophical treatise, *De docta ignorantia*, lays down, in the first book (ch. xxvi.) the principles of the "negative theology" which he derived from the Pseudo-Dionysius and from Scotus Erigena. God, being absolutely greatest, is absolutely one. There is no opposite to Him: His unity is not the unity which we commonly oppose to plurality. In His oneness, which includes all things, there is no distinction; and so, strictly speaking, we cannot give Him any name or names. We can only say that He is not this, that, or the other. The theology of affirmation, Nicholas says, worships God by faith, attributing to him names or values that we believe Him to possess; but they are the names and values of our own making; but the theology of negation is equally necessary with that of affirmation, since without it God would not be worshipped as infinite, but rather as the creature, and such worship savours of idolatry. “Holy ignorance teaches us that God is ineffable, and this because He is infinitely greater than all that can be named; and because this is verily so, we speak more truly of Him by removal and negation, as great Dionysius did, who would not have Him as truth, nor as understanding, nor as light, nor as any of the terms usually ascribed; whom Rabbi Solomon and all wise men follow. Whence He is neither Father, nor Son nor Holy Spirit, according to this negative theology, according to which He is infinite only.”

Now what is sometimes described as Nicholas’s scepticism of the intellect is rooted in this idea of the absolute unity and infinity of God. *Docta ignorantia* is far removed from any despair or belittling of the human intelligence. No man with such respect for mathematical truth should be so accused. It implies a doctrine of the relation of the finite to the infinite which makes a severe demand upon the intellect, asking for an effort of abnegation, in order that through this act the creature seeking may come within the visio or glance of God, and through

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1 Opera, p. 21.
intuition perceive what the discursive reason cannot tell him. Let us explain this process still further.¹

Finite and infinite, in the thought of Nicholas, do not stand in proportional relationship. In the universe, as we know it, things exist in grades of likeness, in relationships of space and time, and so forth. Our habit is to compare and relate one with another, and to try to comprehend their nature by means of likeness (*per similitudinem*). But, Nicholas maintains, no two things are so alike that they cannot be more alike *aeternaliter*. The finite understanding can never reach the essence of things (*quidditas rerum*) by means of the category of likeness; for truth is an indivisible entity that can only be measured by itself. We can never, by our finite understanding, reach truth except in such a way that a more precise attainment is always possible. A mathematical analogy may help. If you multiply the sides of a polygon, you endlessly approach a circle; but you never finally reach it. All that we know of the truth is that in its final, absolute form, it is unattainable to our reason. Our human knowledge is *conjectura*. To be really wise is to understand this, and to realize that we must struggle ceaselessly towards a more perfect knowledge of the truth. Nothing could be more apposite than the passage from Pascal which Dr. Bett has adduced to summarize *docta ignorantia*:

Les sciences ont deux extrémités qui se touchent. La première est la pure ignorance naturelle où se trouvent tous les hommes en naissant. L'autre extrémité est celle où arrivent les grandes âmes, qui, ayant parcouru tout ce que les hommes peuvent savoir, trouvent qu'ils ne savent rien et se rencontrent en cette même ignorance d'où ils étaient partis; mais c'est une ignorance savante qui se connaît.²

How, then, can the eternal, undifferentiated Being have any contact with the world and its individuals? How is the transition to be made from that unity to the changeable world of sense perceptions? Nicholas does not adopt the neo-Platonic plan of emanations or intermediate existences between God and the world. Just in the same way as he makes that absolute maximum

¹ In the analysis that follows I owe much to Dr. Bett's treatment of Nicholas's epistemology; *op. cit.*, pp. 176-180.
and absolute minimum coincide in God—the foundation of his doctrine of the coincidence of opposites—so now he brings together under the single concept of reality God and the visible world, and speaks of reality as if it had two sides or aspects, one being God, the invisible and ultimate reality, the other the world, the visible and derived reality. *Quid est mundus nisi invisibilis Dei apparitio? Quid Deus, nisi visibilium invisibilitas?* The two are separate; yet they are correlated. Using other terms, we might say that reality is both subject and object. As subject, it is God, originating, communicating; as object, originated and communicated, it is the world.

If anything, it is the active and communicating aspect of reality which Nicholas emphasises, and this receives illustration in his doctrine of the Trinity, perhaps the most difficult part of his work, but one of great importance, since, just as to Scotus Erigina, the Trinity was the plan of the universe. Readers of the *De concordantia catholica* will recollect the significance which he attaches to the three-fold structure of the Church and the elaborate symmetry with which he works out the triad in her every past and activity.¹ The Scot and Eckhart had identified Father, Son and Holy Spirit with *essentia, virtus, operatio*: Nicholas adopts these terms on occasion, but his more general practice is to identify them with unity, equality and connexion.

"Things in the world are many, but they are ever seeking unity; they are different, but they are ever seeking equality; they are divided, but they are ever seeking connexion."² True to his practice, Nicholas provides an aenigma or illustration of this, in his *Cribrationis Alchoran*. He depicts himself as beholding a circular piece of water surrounded by meadows and vegetation, and noting that though there was no apparent intake or outlet, the water was quite fresh and greatly appreciated by the natives of the country. This caused him surprise, till he saw that there was a spring in the middle that fed a stream proceeding from it. The water, therefore, was both spring, river and lake; "and this equally, since it was not more spring than river and lake; and in the lake was river and spring, nor was the spring river or

¹ I. iv, v; *Opera*, pp. 695-704.
² Bett, op. cit., p. 149.
nor was the lake spring or lake; nor was the lake spring or river. And I did not see this, except when I considered with my intellect that the spring of itself generated the river; and therefore spring and river are different, as generating and generated, like the Father and the Son. Nor can the lake be river or spring, from which two it proceeds. And I said: the spring is unity, the river equality and the lake is connexion (nexus utriusque)."

Dr. Bett has pointed out that these three attributes involve, in the finite world, the existence of opposites—multiplicity, inequality and separation—and that such a declension is only inconsistent with Nicholas’s view, expressed elsewhere, that the world is the most perfect reflection possible of the perfect nature of God. This is, I think, a just criticism of a serious inconsistency. Yet there is in Nicholas’s idea of the Trinity a principle of some importance: it is the activity within the godhead itself that distinguishes the deity of Cusanus from the abstract principle of pure being conceived by the philosophers. In the God that he has represented to us there is somehow or other expressed the vital pulse and motion of existing nature. This is perhaps the significance of the difficult chapter x of the third book of the De docta ignorantia, where Nicholas discusses this motus or universal impulse in nature towards unity. To him the Trinity is “the Trinity of the Universe.” In God, the absolute, is found the possibility that is limited in this world (he calls this world the “contraction” of possibility and actuality); “in absolute form, which is the Word of the Father, the Son of Holy Writ, are all form and actuality; in the absolute connexion of the divine spirit all impulse to connexion and the proportion and harmony that come therefrom.” The Trinity is thus the indication of the perfect union of possibility and actuality; realizing what the material world is trying to realize, but cannot, because its possibility and actuality are both limited.

Contemporaries must have found Nicholas’s conception of God very difficult. How was He to be made to enter the devotional life of the ordinary believer? At the Benedictine monastery of Tegernsee the prior, Bernard of Waging, was one

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1 II, viii-ix; Opera, p. 902.  
2 Ibid., p. 37.
of Nicholas's most fervent admirers, and had introduced his doctrines to the convent. In 1453 Nicholas sent Bernard the treatise *De Visione Dei*, which was to explain to the brethren in simple language the meaning of learned ignorance and the notion of God which that involved. They had evidently asked to be initiated into the "mystical theology"—their phrase is interesting—which he had made his own. The ascent or approach of the seeking believer is what they must have had in mind. But the *visio Dei* which Nicholas revealed to them is not what we mean when we speak of the "Vision of God." To Nicholas the vision is not man's view of God, but God's glance embracing man. Within that glance, "unlimited sight," as he calls it, man's small life is lived. "Thy look is my being. I am because Thou dost look at me. If Thou didst turn Thy face away, I should cease to be."

Nicholas proposed "by the simplest and most commonplace method to lead you by experience into that most sacred darkness." The method is the metaphor of an *icon* or picture of a face with eyes that follow its beholders about wherever he stands or goes—"as though looking on all round it." He quotes a number of examples, particularly one "by the eminent painter, Roger [van der Weyden] in his priceless picture in the governor's house in Brussels." Put up the picture of God, says Nicholas, and stand a little way off: "and each of you shall find that, from whatever quarter he regardeth it, it looketh upon him as if it looked on none other." The astonishing thing is "the motion of its unmoveable gaze." The picture "keepeth in sight all as they go on their way, though it be in contrary directions; and thus he [the beholder addressed] will prove that that countenance, though motionless, is turned to east in the same way that it is simultaneously turned to west, and in the same way to north and to south." God is called *theos* because he beholds all. It is not of the essence of sight to behold one

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1 See the account of him in E. Vansteenberghe, *Autour de la docte ignorance*, pp. 1-2, and his *opuscula* printed on pp. 163-188.

2 How far had Cusanus intended his *De docta ignorantia* as a work of "mystical theology" for contemplatives? It is very difficult to say. Even those brought up upon Eckhart would have found it extremely hard.

3 I quote from the translation by Miss E. Gurney Salter.
object more than another, "though it is inherent in sight, in its limited state [contractus, as above] to be unable to look on more than one thing at a time or upon all things absolutely. But God is true unlimited sight, and he is not inferior to sight in the abstract, as it can be conceived by the intellect, but is beyond all comparison more perfect. Wherefore the apparent vision of the icon cannot so closely approach the supreme excellent of Absolute Sight as our abstract conception."

And here is his view of the attributes assigned to God, the affirmations which we found the "negative theology" rejecting:

The attributes assigned to God cannot differ in reality, by reason of the perfect simplicity of God. God, being the Absolute Ground of all formal natures embraceth in Himself all natures. Whence, although we attribute to God sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch, sense, reason and intellect, and so forth, according to the divers significations of each word, yet in Him sight is not other than hearing or tasting or smelling or touching or feeling or understanding. And so all theology is said to be established in a circle, because any one of His attributes is affirmed of another, and to have with God is to be, and to move is to stand, and to run is to rest; and so with the other attributes. Thus, although in one sense we attribute to him movement and in another rest, yet because He is Himself the Absolute Ground in which all otherness (alteritas) is unity, and all diversity is identity, that diversity which is not, identity proper, to wit diversity as we understand it, cannot exist in God.  

God's face is the archetypal face or, as we might put it, "face"; and Nicholas's reflection upon its power leads him to a passage which explains the "sacred darkness" of the ignorance that he is expounding. The passage, which must be quoted in its entirety, here seems one of the most important for a full understanding of the Cusan dialectic (as I ventured to call it above). He imagines himself looking at a nut-tree, first with the visual eye, then with the mental, and lastly with the eye of holy ignorance:—

Thy face is that power and principle from which all faces are what they are; and, this being so, I turn me to this nut-tree, a big tall tree—and seek to perceive its principle. I see it with the eye of sense to be big and spreading, coloured, laden with branches, leaves and nuts. Then I perceive with the eye of the mind that that tree existed in its seed, not as I now behold it, but potentially. I consider with care the marvellous might of that seed, wherein

1 The Vision of God, p. 12.
the entire tree, and all its nuts, and all the generative power of the nuts, and all trees, existed in the generative power of the nuts. And I perceive how that power can never be fully explicated in any time measured by the motion of the heavens; yet how that same power, though beyond explication, is still limited, because it availeth only in this particular species of nuts. Wherefore, albeit in the seed I perceive only the tree, it is yet in a limited power only. Then, Lord, I consider how the generative power of all the divers species of trees is limited each to its own species, and in those same seeds I perceive the virtual trees.

If, therefore, I am fain to behold the Absolute power of all such generative powers—which is the power, and likewise the principle, giving power to all seeds—I must needs pass beyond all generative power which can be known or imagined, and enter into that ignorance wherein no vestige remaineth of generative power or energy. Then in the darkness I find a Power (virtutem) most stupendous, not to be approached by any power imaginable, and this is the principle which giveth being to all generative and other power. This Power being absolute and exalted above all, giveth to every generative power that power wherein it enfoldeth the virtual tree, together with all things necessary to an actual tree and that inhere in the being of a tree; wherefore this principle and cause containeth in itself, as cause, alike enfolded and absolutely, whatsoever it giveth to its effect.

Like the Confessions of St. Augustine, the Vision of God is addressed to the deity. It is written with a warmth and emotion that glow, particularly in the later chapters (xviii-xxv). The creature can only attain union with God because he is amabilis et intelligibilis; He is to be loved as Deus genitus, the “absolute mediator,” beloved of the Father, loving Him in turn. The son is medium unionis omnium: the means of uniting all. To Nicholas the mediator is the uniter. Human nature could not be united to the Father, save by the Son’s mediation. “Who is not deeply ravished when he meditates carefully on this? For Thou, my God, openest to me such a secret, that I see that man cannot understand Thee, the Father, save in Thy Son, who is intelligible and the mediator; and that to understand Thee is to be united to Thee.” The Son, medium of union, is human nature “profoundly united” to God. Jesus Himself is to be understood as the union (copulatio) of divine and human nature (ch. xx). Nicholas thinks of Him as “within the wall of Paradise,” since His intellect is both Truth and the Image of Truth, and He both Creator and created; not “without the
wall," for that is not possible, since he combines the divine creating
ture with human nature created. It is the humanity of Jesus
that draws men to the Father. *Per te, Iesu, omnes attrahit Pater
homines.* To Cusanus mediation meant the nexus of love.

In the sermon *Vere filius Dei erat iste,* 1 Jesus is represented as
the Word of the Father sending the Father’s message in brief
over the earth.  2 The humanity of Christ, a living book, is the
conclusion of all books, writings, forms, arts, technique. A
conclusion is “a brief word, gathering up in its power all that
could not be sufficiently explained in many books: for it is the
conclusion for which everything is written; for the things that
are written are but its explication.” Those who tend to think
of Nicholas as the severe and abstract philosopher would do
well to turn to the *De Visione Dei* and the Sermons. Here they
will find passages of a serene and moving simplicity. His
learning does not impede him here. Allusions to the canon law,
his patristic learning and mathematical terminology are laid aside,
and a poetic and humble spirit is revealed in the limpid prose
of a great Latinist.

Cusanus is not a casuist; he is no moral theologian. He is
so wrapped up in his vision that sin and error seem very far in
the distance. There is scarcely any doctrine of the atonement;
the sermons are mainly concerned with the nature of God and
the person of Christ, but the sacrifice of the mediator is little
dwelt upon. Nicholas had seen what corruption meant in high
places. His reform of the German monasteries shows him to
have been a shrewd and judicious churchman whose eyes were
open to the abuses prevalent. Yet, save for the practical
political chapters at the end of the *De Concordantia Catholica,*
there is little in his work that is concerned with the problem of
evil. His was a metaphysician’s, not a moral philosopher’s,
mind. He saw the finite and infinite in terms of relationship,
and looked for the union of created man with the creating Father
through the mediation of the Son and the harmonizing of the
Spirit.

1 *Excitationum Liber,* v; Opera, p. 490.
2 "*Est verbum patris abbreuiatum super terram*": loc. cit. Cf. especially
the "*Dies Sanctificatus*" (ed. Hoffmann and Klibansky), pp. 34-36.