

**“NICHOLAS OF CUSA (1401-1464): FIRST MODERN PHILOSOPHER?”**

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## NICHOLAS OF CUSA (1401-1464): FIRST MODERN PHILOSOPHER?

Ever since Ernst Cassirer in his epochal book *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*<sup>1</sup> labeled Nicholas of Cusa “the first modern thinker,” interest in Cusa’s thought has burgeoned. At various times, both before and after Cassirer, Nicholas has been viewed as a forerunner of Leibniz,<sup>2</sup> a harbinger of Kant,<sup>3</sup> a pre-figurer of Hegel,<sup>4</sup> indeed, as an anticipator of the whole of German Idealism.<sup>5</sup> Joachim Ritter, gathering together various comments made by Edmond Vansteenbergh, points to the latter’s view that decisive stimuli went out from Nicholas “to the Academy of Ficino, to Leonardo da Vinci, to Bruno, to Galileo, to French Platonism as it concerns Margaret of Navarre, to Pascal, to Kepler, to Copernicus, to Leibniz”; moreover, “in the latently but lastingly influential world of the German-Dutch *devotio* and mysticism his [intellectual] spirit ... [was] alive.”<sup>6</sup> Heinrich Ritter sees Nicholas in even more grandiose terms: “In the very first years of the fifteenth century a child was born whose life and influence can be seen as a foreshadowing of almost all that the subsequent centuries were to bring.”<sup>7</sup>

The foregoing appraisals are motivated by modern-sounding themes in Cusa’s writings, so that it becomes easy to perceive Nicholas—if not as the Father of Modern Philosophy, a title usually reserved for Descartes—at least as the prime mover of the period that intervenes between the end of the Middle Ages and the time of Descartes.<sup>8</sup>

1. *Cusa’s Modern Themes.*

One can identify at least sixteen Cusan themes that have a peculiarly Modern ring to them and on the basis of which Nicholas has been deemed to occupy a special relationship to Modernity. (a) One such theme is found in his dialogue *De Mente*, Chapter 10: “A part is not known unless the whole is known, for the whole measures the part.” This theme re-surfaces in German Idealism, where the whole’s determining of the part takes ontological precedence over the part’s determining of the whole. (b) A corresponding tenet is found in *De Mente* 3 (69): “If someone had precise knowledge of one thing: then, necessarily, he would have knowledge of all things.” Here again Nicholas so interrelates part and whole that when the part is wholly known, then the whole is known, just as when the whole is known, so too is the part: there is cognitive reciprocity. (c) Another such theme is introduced in Cusa’s *De Beryllo*, viz., the Pythagorean notion that “man is the measure of all things” in that he is the measuring-

scale for all things. Some interpreters have construed this ancient doctrine, as it re-occurs in Cusa's writing, to constitute a preview of Kant's "Copernican Revolution."<sup>9</sup>

(d) Similarly, Nicholas's distinction between *ratio* (reason) and *intellectus* (understanding)—the latter being the higher mental faculty—has been thought to resemble, in relevant respects, Kant's distinction between *Verstand* (understanding) and *Vernunft* (reason),<sup>10</sup> so that for the most part nowadays the Germans translate Cusa's word "*ratio*" by "*Verstand*" and his word "*intellectus*" by "*Vernunft*," even though Nicholas himself used the reverse translations: "*ratio-Vernunft*" and "*intellectus-Verstand*." Nicholas claims that the principle of non-contradiction applies only at the level of *ratio*, not at the level of *intellectus*. And, as we have already seen (n. 4 above), Vansteenberghé understands this doctrine to have become the crux of Hegelianism. (e) Nicholas claims that what is caused cannot be fully or satisfactorily known unless its cause is also known<sup>11</sup>—a doctrine that, once again, sounds anticipatory of Idealism. (f) Nicholas, under the influence of Leon Battista Alberti, emphasizes that human knowledge is perspectival, so that all empirical knowledge is imperfect, incremental, and subject to degrees of certainty and of uncertainty. (g) The Infinite, writes Nicholas, is manifest (symbolically) in and through the finite. Some interpreters have compared Cusa's notion that the Infinite is present in, and is manifest through, the finite as anticipatory of Hegel's notion of an intensive (vs. an extensive) infinity. According to Nicholas the Divine Mind is symbolically "reflected" in and through the human mind, so that all knowledge of the Infinite Being is metaphorical, not analogical. "Infinite goodness is not goodness but is Infinity. Infinite quantity is not quantity but is Infinity. And so on."<sup>12</sup> Yet, we not unfittingly speak of God, metaphorically, as good, immense, etc.

(h) In other words, there is no comparative relation between the finite and the Infinite,<sup>13</sup> so that the medieval view of *analogia entis* as a route for discerning God's nature is foreclosed.<sup>14</sup> (i) Human minds are likened unto living mirrors that mirror one another and all of reality<sup>15</sup>—a comparison adopted also by Leibniz. (j) Mind "performs all [its operations] in order to know itself."<sup>16</sup> Yet, the human mind, Nicholas is said to teach, cannot know itself as it is in and of itself, cannot know its own quiddity. Nicholas is here said by various interpreters to take up a theme—viz., self-knowledge—that later became central to figures such as Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant. (k) Nicholas maintains that the earth *moves*, although he does not state that it rotates about its own

axis or that it revolves about the sun. Still, the fact that he at all ascribes movement to it constitutes a break with the Ptolemaic theory, so that some historians of philosophy have named him “Copernicus before Copernicus.”<sup>17</sup> (l) Also contributing to that name and also Modern-sounding is his notion of relativity, with respect to his teaching that to someone situated on the earth, the center of the universe seems to be the earth but to anyone located on the sun, the sun would seem to be at the center of the universe.<sup>18</sup> (m) Likewise, he holds that there is life on other planets, an idea that has even a familiar contemporary ring. (n) And he emphasizes the importance of mathematics as a symbolism for approaching not only the empirical domain but also both the theological and the non-theological metaphysical domains. (o) He self-consciously raises the issue of the relationship of language to reality, so that some interpreters have viewed him as heralding a nominalistic theory of names, whereas others have taken him to be promoting a realistic theory of names, howbeit with nominalistic overtones. According to such nominalism names do not name the essence of a thing but are only conventional designators;<sup>19</sup> and the definitions of things are not definitions that accord with their quiddity. (p) Cusa is said to pre-figure Leibniz when he asserts that the universe is as perfect as it can be. Even though God could have created an infinite number of better and better universes, He created this present universe to be as perfect as was possible for *it* to be.<sup>20</sup> Something similar holds true, Nicholas teaches, of each being within the universe.<sup>21</sup> This harmony is so intrinsic to the universe that unless the earth and each heavenly body were as it is, “it could neither exist nor exist in such a place and with such an order—nor could the universe exist.”<sup>22</sup> This doctrine-of-harmony has seemed to some historians of philosophy to foretell of Leibnizianism and even of Hegelian and post-Hegelian Idealism.

Some combination of these sixteen tenets appeared to Cassirer, and to certain others before him or after him, to constitute Nicholas of Cusa as a distinctively Modern philosopher—one who partly broke with the High Medieval Aristotelian Scholasticism of Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, as well as with the Late Medieval Scholasticism of William of Ockham. Indeed, to Cassirer it seemed that Nicholas’s very doctrine of *nulla proportio inter finitum et infinitum* undercut the entire foundation of medieval thought<sup>23</sup> and paved the way for a new cosmology, a new (non-Aristotelian) physics, a new epistemology, and a new theology. Little wonder, then, that Heinrich Rombach

labels Cusa “the Aristotle of Modern thought”<sup>24</sup> and that others can exalt him as the equal of Kant and Hegel “in creative, philosophical power, in depth of probing, in breadth and universality of philosophical conception.”<sup>25</sup>

## 2. Cusa’s Theory of Knowledge.

It is impossible here to examine the many facets that have contributed to Nicholas’s being construed as a “Modern” philosopher. However, let us examine the one facet which Vansteenberghé speaks of as the keystone of Nicholas’s philosophy<sup>26</sup> and of which Norbert Herold writes: Some interpreters observe

that the reorienting-of-thought that finds its expression in Kant’s giving new meaning to the concept of subject, takes its departure, as regards its essential features, from Cusanus. The turning back to one’s own subjectivity is generally understood as what is new about, and characteristic of, Modern philosophy, so that Modern philosophy can be described as the history of a progressive self-reflection. Hence, the reckoning of Nicholas of Cusa as belonging to the Modern Age, or to its beginnings, depends on how far one sees as present in him this turning back, which is represented as transcendental reflection.<sup>27</sup>

Let us follow Herold and Vansteenberghé in construing the central issue in assessing Nicholas’s Modernity as the issue of Nicholas’s theory of knowledge. It is not a question of the Cusan doctrine of learned ignorance or of the doctrine of *nulla proportio*. Rather, the central question is that of how close Nicholas comes to advancing a Kantian-like transcendental idealism, according to which the forms of space and of time, along with certain universal concepts, or categories, are imposed by the mind on an unordered sensory-manifold, so that in this way the “given” becomes synthesized and constructed by the knowing mind, which makes the objects-of-experience conform to it, rather than its conforming to them when it combines sensory-images of them, compares the images, and abstracts from the images mental concepts.

Interpreters who see Nicholas as a proto-Kantian are prone to call attention to seven supposed features of his thought.

a. *Time*. In *De Ludo Globi* II (93) Nicholas puts into the mouth of Albert, his discussant, the words: “How greatly it pleases me to have understood that if the rational soul were removed, then time (which is the measure of motion) could neither be nor be known, since the rational soul is the measuring-scale of motion, or the numerical-scale of motion! And how greatly it pleases me that things conceptual, insofar as they are conceptual, have this fact from the [rational] soul, which is the creator of things conceptual, even as God is the Creator of things really existent!”<sup>28</sup> Kant, too,

interpreters remind us, makes the point that if the knowing subject were removed, then time (and space) would also disappear.<sup>29</sup> Like Kant, Nicholas is said to maintain that our mental conception of time makes possible empirical succession.<sup>30</sup> For he declares: “Since time is the measure of motion, it is the instrument of the measuring soul. Therefore, the form (*ratio*) of the soul does not depend on time, but, rather, the form of the measure-of-motion, which is called time, depends on the rational soul. Therefore, the rational soul is not subject to time but exists antecedently to time, just as sight exists antecedently to the eye....”<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Nicholas teaches that “the rational soul enfolds the enfolding-of-time, which is called *the now* or *the present*; for time is found to consist only of the now.”<sup>32</sup> So, according to certain of Cusa’s interpreters, time, which consists only of the now, resides in the mind. And in order to differentiate and to measure time the rational soul likens itself to the now that is within it.<sup>33</sup>

b. *Space*. Likewise, various interpreters construe Cusa as anticipating even Kant’s doctrine that space is a transcendental ideal that the mind contributes to the apprehending of the empirically real; i.e., they understand Cusa to speak not in Kant’s way about space as a form of intuition but to speak in a more general and vague way about space as a product of the understanding (*Verstand*).<sup>34</sup> Cassirer regards even Cusa’s conception of mathematical space as pointing in the direction of Modernity:

The spatial change-of-place of a point is not anything other than the law-like consequence and ordering of its infinitely many states of rest: *motus est ordinata quies seu quietes seriatim ordinatae*. With these words Cusanus anticipated not only the thought but even the *language* of the new mathematics as it would unfold itself with Descartes and Leibniz. [With Cusanus] the marking of co-ordinates, of lines applied in an ordered way, is in [a state of] preparation, while, on the other hand, the universal conception which leads to the foundation of the integral calculus already prevails.<sup>35</sup>

However, the parallels between Cusa and Kant are said to go even further, for a similar interpretation besets Nicholas’s doctrine of the categories.

c. *Categories*. In *De Ludo Globi* II (93) Nicholas writes: “The ten categories are enfolded in the rational soul’s conceptual power. So too [are enfolded] the five predicables and whatever logical principles and other things are necessary for perfect conceiving (whether they exist independently of the mind or not), since without them no discernment and conception can be perfectly possessed by the soul.” Likewise, in *De Mente* 8 (108) he speaks of the mind as *making* the predicables: viz., genera, differentiae, species, proprium, and accident.<sup>36</sup> And, according to Henke, “the transcendental

starting-point is manifest in Cusa very clearly in his conception that the categories do not exist outside the mind.”<sup>37</sup> Henke also claims that, for Cusa, “the unfolding of the categories out of the mind’s oneness anticipates, in its point-of-departure, Kant’s transcendental deduction, even if the unfolding’s systematic development is lacking.”<sup>38</sup>

d. *Productive Imagination*. Interpreters such as Henke, in emphasizing Cusa’s philosophical kinship with Kant, also emphasize Cusa’s ascribing to the mind a spontaneity and a normativeness whereby the mind determines the measure of things. For Nicholas considers mind (*mens*)—whose name derives, he says, from “measuring” (“*mensurare*”)<sup>39</sup>—as measuring both itself and other things. In the very first chapter of *De Mente* he asserts: “mind is that from which derive the boundary and the measurement of every [respective] thing.” Moreover, “multitude and magnitude derive from mind.”<sup>40</sup> And “from the power of multitude quantities, qualities, and the other categories descend and furnish a knowledge of things.”<sup>41</sup> So mind, says Henke on behalf of Cusa, is active through an innate spontaneity,<sup>42</sup> an innate power-of-judgment (*vis iudiciaria*)<sup>43</sup> that sets norms, so that the mind, in receiving sense-impressions, actively structures<sup>44</sup> them in accordance with its own productive (vs. reproductive) imagination<sup>45</sup> and categories. Thus, the mind’s concepts are not measured by how well they conform to objects, but, rather, the objects are measured by how closely they conform to the mind’s universal concepts<sup>46</sup>—much as a circular object is judged to be more or less circular in conformity to the mind’s concept of a circle.<sup>47</sup>

e. *Analogy with Mathematics*. Interpreters such as Cassirer see an analogy between what Cusa says about mathematical knowledge and what he comes to hold regarding empirical knowledge. For example, our knowledge of what, by definition, a true circle is superior to the perception of the imperfect circularity of any given thing.<sup>48</sup>

The “circle in the mind” is the singular pattern and *measure* of the circle that we draw in the sand. Analogously, with respect to each content that presents itself to us we can distinguish a *twofold mode of being*: viz., insofar as we consider it once in all the contingency of its concrete existence and consider it again in the purity and the necessity of its exact concept. The *truth* of things is found first of all in this second kind of conception. Moreover, Cusanus applies the viewpoint of assimilation to this conception. But now it is no longer a matter of the mind’s turning itself to, and conforming itself to, the sensible object but is rather a matter of the mind’s turning itself to, and conforming itself to, the objects’ pure mathematical definition, which represents the objects’ entire cognitive content.<sup>49</sup>

f. *Assimilation*. Accordingly, in measuring an object the mind assimilates itself, i.e., likens itself, not to the object itself but to the concept that the mind has formed of the object. Hence, what is known is neither the object itself nor the object in itself but only the object insofar as it appears to the mind through the apparatus of the productive power of imagination, the discriminating power of reason (*ratio*), and the synthesizing power of intellect (*intellectus*). Hence, Nicholas states: “mind has within itself that unto which it looks and in accordance with which it judges about external objects.”<sup>50</sup> However, according to this interpretation, the categories and the predicables are not concreated with the mind but are “unfolded” from the mind’s innate natural propensity to think in exactly these normative ways.

g. *Mind as Pattern for the Empirical*.

Another way of expressing the foregoing points is given by Cassirer when he declares: “Thus, the human intellect is indeed [for Cusanus] an image of the Absolute Being but is also a model and a pattern of all empirical being: mens per se est dei imago et omnia post mentem, non nisi per mentem.”<sup>51</sup> This is Cassirer’s way of interpreting Nicholas to mean that the mind imposes its forms upon a partly unorganized sensory manifold.

3. *Consequences of the Proto-Kantian Interpretation*.

Because those who interpret Nicholas of Cusa to be a proto-Kantian cannot dismiss the passages in which he alludes to the human mind as assimilating itself to the object,<sup>52</sup> alludes to truth as an adequation of the mind and the thing,<sup>53</sup> and alludes to the intellect’s knowing by way of abstracting an intelligible representation from what is a perceptual likeness,<sup>54</sup> they conclude, necessarily, that Nicholas’s theory of knowledge is inconsistent.

Thus Nicholas attempts to merge the metaphysical viewpoint [according to] which the mind (1) as intermediary between infinite and finite stands above the things or (2) as that which, being directed at infinity, develops its ideas from out of itself (the concept is better than the thing)—to merge it with the empirical viewpoint, which lets mind, which is a thing among other things, find an outer-world that cannot be adequately imaged (the concept is worse than the thing). This attempt could not possibly succeed, because *complicatio* [enfolding] and *similitudo* [likeness], when thought-through consistently, simply exclude each other.<sup>55</sup>

4. *Resolution of the Perceived Contradiction*.

There is, indeed, a tension between one’s picturing Cusa as a proto-Kantian and one’s picturing him as someone who holds a more Albertistic-Thomistic theory of



empirical knowledge, according to which the categories-of-thought correspond to categories-of-being, so that in the course of knowing the world, the human mind must liken itself to an object that is known by way of abstracting *species intelligibiles*, or concepts, from *species sensibiles*, or sensory-images. According to this latter theory the categories-of-thought are not such that they enable the mind to *transform* the manifold of experience but are such that they enable the mind to *conform itself* to the instantiated categories-of-being, so that the mind can “reflect,” or represent, the outer-world realistically, even if with some degree of imprecision and even though qualities such as colors do not characterize the world apart from a perceiver. These two different schools of thought—the Kantian-like and the Thomistic-like—are in and of themselves unreconcilable, so that if a thinker were to subscribe to both of them, he would do so inconsistently. However, Nicholas of Cusa, does not, in fact, subscribe to them both; for he does not adopt the theses alleged by the interpreters who desire to link his epistemology with Kant’s.

(a) Nicholas does not adopt the view that time is but a form of the human mind—the view that time is unfolded from the mind so as to condition the world. What Nicholas means in *De Ludo Globi* II (93) is not that in the absence of rational souls there would be no time. What he means is that there would be no observer-measurer of succession—succession which would continue on, as would also change and plurality. Since there would still be succession, there would still be time insofar as there would remain change that could be measured and that God Himself could measure. For God would know of the succession and would be able to measure it by means of an infinite number of measuring-scales. When Nicholas says that “the Eternal Mind understands, without successiveness, all things at once and in every manner of understanding,”<sup>56</sup> he means to include (among the things that the Eternal Mind understands) the fact of successiveness; and he means to include (among “every manner of understanding”) the way in which the human mind would apprehend successiveness. Accordingly, the Divine Mind, which is without successiveness, understands *the way in which* a human mind would apprehend successiveness but does not apprehend successiveness *in the way in which* a human mind would apprehend it. On Cusa’s view time began to exist with the created, changing world, not merely with the creation of the human mind. Time depends upon the human mind only insofar as the human mind sets up measuring-

scales for time. It marks off periods into years, months, weeks, days, hours, and so on. But it could just as well adopt a different scale, one whereby a day would last 48 hours and an hour would last 30 minutes. Or it could change the definition of a minute's length, should it choose to. Indeed, the soul "is the creator of things conceptual" in just this sense (as well as in the sense of formulating empirical concepts by way of abstracting them). Finally, interpreters have mistranslated one of Nicholas's sentences in *De Ludo Globi* II (94): "Non igitur dependet ratio animae a tempore, sed ratio mensurae motus, quae tempus dicitur ab anima rationali dependet ...." This sentence does not mean "Therefore, the form (*ratio*) of the soul does not depend on time, but, rather, the form of the measure-of-motion, which is called time, depends on the rational soul," a translation that favors the view that time is a form of the soul and depends on the soul for its existence. Rather, what Nicholas means is better captured by the translation: "Therefore, the soul's measuring-scale (*ratio*) does not depend on time; instead, the scale for the measuring of motion—a measuring which is called time—depends on the rational soul." And, indeed, according to Nicholas, the measuring-scale for time does depend on the rational soul, in the way explained above.

(b) Moreover, Nicholas nowhere teaches that space is a mental form whereby spatial-relations are constructively read-into an unorganized sensory-manifold. Most interpreters who take him to propound a doctrine of space that makes it transcendently ideal do so as a further inference from their conviction that he maintains that time is transcendently ideal. But in his works there is no passage where he expresses doubts about the existence of space and spatial relations independently of the human mind. Yet, he does recognize the relativity of our perception of spatial relations and of motion, as when he cites the illustration of the moving ship (*De Docta Ignorantia* II,12) aboard which one would not perceive himself to be moving if he did not see the shoreline or other such markers.

(c) Furthermore, Nicholas does not regard the twelve categories and the five predicables as present only in the mind. Henke is mistaken when he asserts the opposite.<sup>57</sup> For there is nothing in Cusa's *De Mente* 11 or in his *De Ludo Globi* II (93)—the texts cited by Henke—that denies the reality of extra-mental categories or that denies the extra-mental reality of species, genera, accidents, etc. Nonetheless, Nicholas rejects a Platonistic theory of universals.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, he holds a Thomistic "moderate realistic"

theory of universals;<sup>59</sup> in accordance with this theory, as he espouses it, differences of genera are not simply marked off normatively by the human mind; instead, they are realities existing independently of the human mind but not independently of God's Mind.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, although Nicholas states that "multitude and magnitude derive from mind,"<sup>61</sup> he means to include the *Divine Mind* when he there speaks of *mind*—a point that is clear from *De Mente* 9 (117).<sup>62</sup> Likewise, when in *De Mente* Nicholas, speaking through the literary figure of the Layman, affirms that "number and all things derive from mind,"<sup>63</sup> the dialogue's Philosopher immediately asks: "Is there, then, no plurality of things apart from our mind's consideration?" To this query the Layman replies: "There is. But it is from the Eternal Mind. Hence, just as with respect to God the plurality of things is from the Divine Mind, so with respect to us the plurality of things is from our mind. For only mind numbers." Thus, another mistake made by those who interpret Cusa as a proto-Kantian is the mistake of failing to see that sometimes (but not always) his use of the word "*mens*" encompasses both "*mens humana*" and "*mens divina*." According to Nicholas as well as according to Thomas, categories characterize the world, even apart from the human mind. For example, things are substances<sup>64</sup> and undergo causal influences apart from the presence or even the existence of any human observer-measurers.

(d) Likewise, Nicholas nowhere distinguishes imagination into a reproductive and a productive power. Ascribing to Nicholas a quasi-Kantian conception of imagination's productive determining of objects is an example of eisegesis. Although Nicholas does maintain that the mind can conceive of a perfect circle, which nowhere exists independently of the mind, he nowhere attributes to the power of imagination, rather than to the power of reason (*ratio*), this idealized abstracting from visual circles. Nor does he anywhere claim that such concepts become patterns and models through which we actually experience objects as perfectly circular, etc. Rather, through these ideal concepts, once we have formed them, we speak of and measure objects in their varying degrees of imperfect circularity. But these concepts do not *constitute* the objects as circular (or as triangular, square, etc.). (e) We dare not follow Cassirer in drawing an analogy between arithmetical and geometrical concepts, on the one hand, and empirical concepts, on the other hand.<sup>65</sup> For although Nicholas maintains that geometrical figures are idealizations that we form when we are stimulated by the perception of imperfectly-

shaped figures, nevertheless such a consideration does not apply to empirical concepts. That is to say, although mathematical concepts are declared by Nicholas to be precise concepts, because they are derived from reason alone (*ratio*) when it is properly stimulated by the senses, the opposite is true of empirical concepts: all of them are imprecise, because they are imperfectly abstracted from imperfect sensory-images. And even though the human mind makes numbers, so that in this respect (conceptual) multitude and (conceptual) magnitude can be said to derive from the mind,<sup>66</sup> nevertheless the numbers that proceed from our minds are said by Nicholas to be images of number that proceeds from the Divine Mind,<sup>67</sup> so that conceptual multitude and conceptual magnitude would remain even if there were no human minds; similarly, there would remain the multiple real-objects that have magnitude; for Nicholas states unequivocally that plurality would remain.<sup>68</sup>

(f) Moreover, Nicholas endorses the view that empirical knowledge is the knowledge of objects by way of their likenesses. He does not teach that the mind knows only the likenesses, never the objects themselves. According to Nicholas, as also according to Thomas, the images and the concepts (both of which he calls likenesses)<sup>69</sup> are intentional: i.e., they point beyond themselves to the objects of which they are likenesses. And the conceptual likenesses are abstracted from (and, in the case of mathematical concepts, are idealized from) sensory-images, which themselves are more proximate likenesses of the material objects. According to Nicholas the making of *a priori* concepts—such as the concept of oneness or the concept of fairness—is done by the mind on the occasion of the stimulation of the senses. *A priori* concepts, on his view, are not concreated with the soul.<sup>70</sup> What is concreated is a power-of-judgment (*vis iudiciaria*), together with an aptitude (*aptitudo*) for recognizing instances of rudimentary unfairness, etc., and for making a corresponding concept. For example, as soon as the mind hears of and understands the principle “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you,” it assents to it, recognizing it as a principle of justice; and out of its own creative spontaneity and its own concreated aptitude, the mind proceeds to make a concept of justice, even though an imprecise (but *a priori*) one.<sup>71</sup> Thus, not all *a priori* knowledge has the precision of *a priori* mathematical knowledge.

(g) Finally, according to Cusa, mind is not a pattern for the empirical. The text alluded to by Cassirer<sup>72</sup> in his claiming the opposite is *De Mente* 3 (73:12-15), which may

be compared with *De Mente* 4 (76:1-7).<sup>73</sup> But these passages indicate only that non-human animals, vegetables, and minerals are formed in the image of God insofar as they partake of *mind*—by which Nicholas here means not the human mind but mind understood generally as intelligence. For he views all of nature as ordered and purposive, so that in this respect nature is pervaded by intelligible principles, i.e., by “mind”. Nicholas is not here making a point about the human mind’s legislating and prescribing its categories to nature. Cassirer has misapprehended the text’s meaning.

##### 5. *Outcome.*

So, in last analysis, Nicholas of Cusa is not an anticipator of Kant’s theory of knowledge; nor does his theory even come close to resembling Kant’s theory. Rather, interpreters such as Cassirer, Falckenberg, Henke, and Josef Koch,<sup>74</sup> are guilty of what borders on *Schwärmerei*: they are over-eager to detect in Nicholas’s genius signs of Modernity. Over and above the fact of this gushing over-eagerness is the further fact that Nicholas did not always express himself clearly. Many of his works were written in haste; others of them attest to his being a *speculative* philosopher—one who generates many different ideas but one who does not patiently take the time to work out their implications. Just as Nicholas does not anticipate, pre-figure, foreshadow, etc., Kant, so also he does not anticipate Copernicus or Spinoza or Leibniz<sup>75</sup> or Berkeley or Hegel. Various of his insufficiently qualified expressions have created a gap between what he means and what he says, so that one must interpret his unclear passages in terms of his other, clearer, passages, rather than leaping to spectacular conclusions, as, say, Kurt Flasch has recently done.<sup>76</sup>

Is, then, Nicholas of Cusa the first Modern thinker, the first Modern philosopher, as Cassirer and his followers are wont to proclaim?, all the while admitting that

Nicolaus Cusanus, in the whole of his thought and his writings, is still very firmly rooted in the total outlook of the medieval mind and of medieval life. The cord that linked together the conceptualizations of the centuries [that intervened] between Christianity’s content of faith and the theoretical content of the Aristotelian and the Neoplatonic systems was a tight cord—much too tight for it by means of a single stroke to have become severed for a thinker [such as Cusanus,] who stood so firmly and assuredly within that content of faith.<sup>77</sup>

In truth, Nicholas is *not* the first Modern thinker. For his “Modern themes” are not sufficiently developed for him to warrant this title. Moreover, certain of those themes

are not really Nicholas's but are ascribed to him out of misunderstanding. In retrospect, Nicholas must be regarded as a transitional figure some of whose ideas (1) were *suggestive* of new ways of thinking but (2) were not such as to conduct him far enough away from the medieval outlook for him truly to be called a Modern thinker. Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel never mention him, although Kepler, Descartes, and Leibniz do. His ideas were given a boost by the printing of his collected works (Paris, 1514) by Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples. They were given a further boost by Giordano Bruno's appropriating some of them. Nevertheless, Emerich Coreth's judgment remains cogent: "Cusa's direct influence on Modern thought is small; an immediate common-bond is scarcely confirmable."<sup>78</sup>

Nicholas's intellectual influence on his own generation and on subsequent generations remained meager. Nevertheless, as Cassirer discerns, Nicholas commands our respect—though for reasons less pronounced than Cassirer himself gives. Looking back on Cusa we find in his corpus of writings certain ideas that were developed by his Modern successors, without his having directly influenced most of those successors through his own writings, of which they had scarcely any first-hand knowledge. The proper metaphor for assessing Cusa's historical role is that of *das Türöffnen*: Nicholas opens the door to Modernity—without himself ever crossing over the threshold that distinguishes Middle Ages from Modernity. Thus, he does not help "legitimate" the Modern Age, to borrow Hans Blumenberg's title.<sup>79</sup> Instead, the reverse is true: the Modern Age helped "legitimate" certain of his ideas (with or without knowing them to be his)—for example, his notion of learned ignorance, his notion of the infinite disproportion between the finite and the infinite, his notion of the coincidence of opposites in God, his notion of the mobility of the earth, and his notion of the earth's being privatively infinite (i.e., its being finite but unbounded). By themselves these five notions—being more in resonance with the Modern Age than with the medieval world—evidence for us that Nicholas's thought is, indeed, an unmistakable major boundary-marker on the pathway to Modernity. That is why these five themes, in particular, have been so intently explored by today's philosophers.<sup>80</sup>

Jasper Hopkins

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<sup>1</sup> Leipzig: Teubner, 1927, p. 10: “But this contrast [between the being of the absolute and the being of the empirical-conditioned] is now no longer merely posited dogmatically; rather, [according to Cusanus] it is to be grasped in its ultimate depth; it is to be conceived from out of the conditions of human knowledge. This position on the problem of knowledge determines Cusanus as the first Modern thinker” [“... charakterisiert Cusanus als den ersten modernen Denker”]. All translations are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Zimmermann, “Der Cardinal Nicolaus Cusanus als Vorläufer Leibnitzens,” pp. 306-328 of *Sitzungsberichte der philosophisch-historischen Classe der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, 8 (Vienna, 1852).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Falckenberg, *Grundzüge der Philosophie des Nicolaus Cusanus mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Lehre vom Erkennen* (Breslau: Koebner, 1880), p. 3: “That which Nicholas wanted, Leibniz, Kant, and Kant’s successors brought about.” See also Josef Koch, *Die Ars coniecturalis des Nikolaus von Kues* (Cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1956), pp. 47-48. See n. 73 below.

<sup>4</sup> Edmond Vansteenbergh, *Le Cardinal Nicolas de Cues (1401-1464)* (Paris, 1920; reprinted in Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1963), p. 282: “The great discovery of the Cardinal, the discovery that constitutes the basic originality of his system, is—to use modern terms—his critique of the faculty of knowledge. ‘The principle of contradiction has validity only for our reason.’ Isn’t all of Hegel germinally present in this affirmation? And doesn’t the fact alone of having formulated it make of Nicholas of Cusa one of the fathers of German thought?”

Note also Josef Stallmach’s citation (p. 243): “According to Erwin Metzke ‘no one has come closer to the thinking of Nicholas of Cusa than has Hegel’.” Stallmach, “Das Absolute und die Dialektik bei Cusanus im Vergleich zu Hegel,” pp. 241-255 in *Nicolò Cusano agli inizi del mondo moderno* (Atti del Congresso internazionale in occasione del V centenario della morte di Nicolò Cusano. Bressanone, 6-10 settembre 1964). Florence: Sansone, 1970.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Copleston lends credence to this view, without himself actually endorsing it, in Vol. III, p. 245 of his *History of Philosophy*. Note also Heinrich Rombach’s appraisal: “It is scarcely possible to over-estimate the importance of Cusa for the development of the

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modern branches of learning.... The horizon of his thought not only encompasses the sphere of Descartes' thinking and contains the most important impulses for the metaphysics of Spinoza and of Leibniz but also is exemplary and fundamental for the Kantian turn in philosophy and, therewith, for German Idealism too." *Substanz, System, Struktur. Die Ontologie des Funktionalismus und der philosophische Hintergrund der modernen Welt* (Munich: Alber, 1965), p. 150 of Vol. I.

<sup>6</sup> Joachim Ritter, p. 111 of his "Die Stellung des Nicolaus von Cues in der Philosophiegeschichte. Grundsätzliche Probleme der neueren Cusanus-Forschung," *Blätter für Deutsche Philosophie*, 13 (1939-40), 111-155. Ritter also (p. 111) understands Vansteenbergh to be teaching that Cusa "stands with Eckhart, with Böhme, Kant, and Hegel in a single movement, being equal to them in creative, philosophical power, in depth of probing, in breadth and universality of philosophical conception."

<sup>7</sup> Heinrich Ritter, *Geschichte der Philosophie*. Vol. IX: *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie* (Hamburg: Perthes, 1850), p. 141.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Falckenberg speaks of Cusanus as "der Reigenführer jenes vorbereitenden Zwischenraumes": "the dance-leader of that preparatory intermediate-period." *Geschichte der neueren Philosophie von Nikolaus von Kues bis zur Gegenwart* (Leipzig: Viet, 1905), p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit* (Berlin: Verlag Bruno Cassirer; Vol. I, 2nd ed., 1911), p. 38: "Genuine rational concepts must not constitute the product and the end of the cognitive process but must constitute its *beginning* and its presupposition." Cassirer, *ibid.*, pp. 35-36: "From *similitudo* Cusa moves on to *assimilatio*: from the assertion of a similarity present in the *things*—a similarity that furnishes the basis for their comprehension and their generic characterizing—he moves to representing the process by virtue of which the *mind* first must produce and create a harmonious connection between the objects and itself. At this point, the self no longer recognizes the objects in conforming itself to them and in copying them; on the contrary, the self recognizes them in apprehending and comprehending them in accordance with the likeness of its own being. We understand outer-objects only insofar as we are able to re-discover in them the categories of our own thought. All 'measuring' of objects arises, fundamentally, only from the mind's singular



desire to arrive at the measure of itself and its powers.” Falckenberg, *Grundzüge, op. cit.* (n. 3 above), p. 139: “Nevertheless, it remains a pleasure to see, on the threshold of the Modern Age, the doctrine already advanced by Plotinus and Scotus Eriugena, renewed [by Cusa] so forcefully that time, numbers, spatial figures, and all categories ... are brought forth out of the creative power of the mind.”

<sup>10</sup> Josef Koch, *Die Ars coniecturalis, op. cit.* (n. 3 above), p. 48. See n. 73 below.

<sup>11</sup> Cusa, *De Possest* 38. *Sermones* [contained in Vol. II of *Nicolai Cusae Cardinalis Opera* (Paris, 1514); reprinted in Frankfurt am Main: Minerva Verlag, 1962], folio 146<sup>v</sup>, lines 17-18. *Sermo CXXXV* (3:13) [Vol. XVIII, fascicle 1 (1995) of the Heidelberg Academy edition of *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia* (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag). All references to Cusa’s works are to the Latin texts. References to *De Docta Ignorantia*; *De Coniecturis*; *De Filiatione Dei*; *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*; *De Pace Fidei*; *De Beryllo* (1988 edition); *Cribratio Alkorani*; *De Ludo Globi*; and *De Venatione Sapientiae* are to the editions in the series *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag). Other references are to my editions: *De Aequalitate* [in *Nicholas of Cusa: Metaphysical Speculations: Volume One*]; *De Sapientia I* and *II*; *De Mente* [in *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge*]; *De Visione Dei* [in *Nicholas of Cusa’s Dialectical Mysticism* (1988, 2nd ed.)]; *De Possest* [in *A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa* (1986, 3rd ed.)]; *De Li Non Aliud* [in *Nicholas of Cusa on God as Not-other* (1987, 3rd ed.)]; and the *Compendium* [in *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge*].

<sup>12</sup> Cusa, *De Visione Dei* 13 (58).

<sup>13</sup> This doctrine will be referred to hereafter as the doctrine of *nulla proportio*. Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia* I, 3 (9) and II, 2 (102).

<sup>14</sup> Cassirer, *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1927), p. 11: “However, in these concise and simple opening sentences of the work *De Docta Ignorantia* a decisive turning is now already completed. For now, with a single sharp cut there is severed the cord that previously bound together scholastic theology and scholastic logic: logic in its previous form stopped being an instrument of the speculative doctrine of God.”

<sup>15</sup> Cusa, *De Filiatione Dei* 3 (65-67).

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<sup>16</sup> Cusa, *De Mente* 9 (123:7).

<sup>17</sup> Joachim Ritter, “Stellung,” *op. cit.* (n. 6 above), p. 112, quoting other interpreters.

<sup>18</sup> Cassirer claims a connection here with Cusa’s doctrine of learned ignorance: “... the thought of ‘docta ignorantia’ is what first enlightened Cusanus about the relativity of all spatial location and therewith made him the forerunner of the Copernican world-system.” *Das Erkenntnisproblem, op. cit.* (n. 9 above), p. 29. Or, again, on p. 32 Cassirer writes: “Cusanus here [i.e., with respect to his interest in empirical details] indicates the *historical turn of Platonism*—a turning which leads to *Kepler and Galileo*.”

<sup>19</sup> Cusa, *De Mente* 2 (58).

<sup>20</sup> Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia* II, 1 (97).

<sup>21</sup> Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia* II, 2 (104) and II, 10 (154).

<sup>22</sup> Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia*, II, 13 (178).

<sup>23</sup> Cassirer, *Individuum, op. cit.* (n. 14 above), pp. 11-13.

<sup>24</sup> Heinrich Rombach, *Substanz, System, Struktur, op. cit.* (n. 5 above), p. 150, note 4: “Es wäre nicht falsch, wurde man Cusanus den Aristotles des neuzeitlichen Denkens nennen.”

<sup>25</sup> See n. 6 above.

<sup>26</sup> Edmond Vansteenbergh, *Le Cardinal, op. cit.* (n. 4 above), p. 279: “The keystone of Nicholas of Cusa’s philosophical system—and in this respect Nicholas is quite modern—is his theory of knowledge.”

<sup>27</sup> Norbert Herold, *Menschliche Perspektive und Wahrheit. Zur Deutung der Subjektivität in den philosophischen Schriften des Nikolaus von Kues* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1975), pp. 2-3.

<sup>28</sup> “ALBERTUS: Quantum mihi placet intellexisse tempus, quod est mensura motus, sublata rationali anima non posse aut esse aut cognosci, cum sit ratio seu numerus motus; et quod notionalia, ut notionalia sunt, ab anima hoc habent, quae est notionalium creatrix sicut deus essentialium.”

<sup>29</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* A 42.

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<sup>30</sup> Norbert Henke, *Der Abbildbegriff in der Erkenntnislehre des Nikolaus von Kues* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1969), p. 60.

<sup>31</sup> Cusa, *De Ludo Globi* II (94).

<sup>32</sup> Cusa, *De Ludo Globi* II (92).

<sup>33</sup> Henke, *op. cit.* (n. 30 above), p. 60. Note also Cassirer's somewhat less extreme judgment (*Individuum, op. cit.*, n. 14 above), p. 44: "As origin and creator of the branches of learning, the mind is not only in time, but, much rather, time is in it." Note also Cassirer's further judgment, on pp. 44-45: "Just as the eye is related to sight, so too time is related to the soul: time is the instrument that the soul uses in order to be able to fulfill its basic function, viz., the function of ordering and classifying what is manifold and what is dispersed in various ways. Just as Cusanus by means of this idealistic conception lays the ground for the Modern mathematical-physical notion-of-time that later appeared with Kepler and Leibniz, so too he therewith simultaneously opened a new view of history and a new appraisal thereof."

<sup>34</sup> Falckenberg, *Geschichte, op. cit.* (n. 8 above), p. 20: "Furthermore, the thought upon which Cusa bases his proof of immortality seems thoroughly modern: viz., the thought that space and time are products of the understanding [*Verstand*] and that, therefore, they cannot harm the mind, which produces them. For the producer stands above, and is more powerful than, his product."

<sup>35</sup> Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem, op. cit.* (n. 9 above), p. 43.

<sup>36</sup> These are the five predicables, or second-order predicates, according to Porphyry, who substituted "species" for "definition," thus modifying Aristotle's enumeration. "Proprium" indicates a permanent property that is uniquely characterizing (of a species) but that is not an essential property. For example, it is a proprium of human beings to be *capable of laughter*.

<sup>37</sup> Henke, *op. cit.* (n. 30 above), p. 115.

<sup>38</sup> Henke, *ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>39</sup> Cusa, *De Mente* 1 (57). Nicholas takes this point from Albertus Magnus.

<sup>40</sup> Cusa, *De Mente* 9 (116).

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<sup>41</sup> Cusa, *De Mente* 10 (128).

<sup>42</sup> Henke, *op. cit.* (n. 30 above), pp. 109-115.

<sup>43</sup> Cusa, *De Mente* 4 (77).

<sup>44</sup> Henke, *op. cit.* (n. 30 above), pp. 52, 58-59, 96-97. Cf. Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem*, *op. cit.* (n. 9 above), p. 37: “The soul itself sends forth through the intermediary of the peripheral organs decidedly different ‘species’, which in accordance with the influence of the objects are changed in many ways. Thereby they bring about the changing plurality of the impressions. Thus, in general, not only the nature of the outer-object but also the nature of the receiving medium determines the kind of sense-perception.”

<sup>45</sup> Henke, *ibid.*, pp. 38, 66-68, 70-71, 76, 86.

<sup>46</sup> Henke, *ibid.*, pp. 42, 61, 112.

<sup>47</sup> Ekkehard Fräntzki, *Nikolaus von Kues und das Problem der absoluten Subjektivität* (Meisenheim: Hain, 1972), p. 51: “In that Cusa considers the understanding [*Verstand*] or the human mind as that which gives the measure [of a thing], he already completes, in the domain of knowing-as-a-measuring, ... that ‘Copernican Revolution’ which Kant was later to conceive of for knowing-in-general.”

<sup>48</sup> Cusa, *De Mente* 7 (103).

<sup>49</sup> Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem*, *op. cit.* (n. 9 above), pp. 38-39.

<sup>50</sup> Cusa, *De Mente* 5 (85).

<sup>51</sup> Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem*, *op. cit.* (n. 9 above), p. 37. Cusa, *De Mente* 3 (73).

<sup>52</sup> E.g., Cusa, *De Mente* 7 (99:7-8) and 7 (104:6-8). Cusa, *Compendium* 10 (32):

“Knowledge occurs by means of a likeness.” Cusa, *De Visione Dei* 20 (90): “For a thing is understood by a man only by means of a likeness.” Cusa, *De Venatione Sapientiae* 17 (50): “Hence since knowledge is assimilation, the intellect finds all things to be within itself as in a mirror that is alive with an intellectual life.” Cusa, *De Mente* 3 (73:1-3): “All things are present in God, but in God they are exemplars of things; all things are present in our mind, but in our mind they are likenesses of things.” (When Nicholas states that all things are present in our mind, he means that they are present in the mind’s power,

they are present in the mind potentially, since the mind has the power to make concepts of whatsoever real things.)

<sup>53</sup> E.g., Cusa, *Compendium* 10 (34:20-22). *De Aequalitate* 39:1-2.

<sup>54</sup> Cusa, *De Venatione Sapientiae* 36 (107).

<sup>55</sup> Falckenberg, *Grundzüge*, *op. cit.* (n. 3 above), pp. 110-111. See also Henke, *op. cit.* (n. 30 above), pp. 123-124. Henke concludes, regarding the relationship (in Cusa's theory of knowledge) between the mind's spontaneous-structuring operation and its copying operation that Nicholas (inconsistently) holds onto both of them by situating them next to each other: "Daher bleibt es bei einem Nebeneinander von Schöpferischem und einem Abbilden" (p. 124). Cf. p. 66: "Es zeigt sich erneut der Widerstreit zwischen der Abbildtheorie und einem Apriorismus in der Erkenntnislehre des Nikolaus von Kues."

<sup>56</sup> Cusa, *De Mente* 11 (133:22-24).

<sup>57</sup> See n. 37 above.

<sup>58</sup> Cusa, *De Mente* 11 (136). Cf. *De Beryllo* 56.

<sup>59</sup> Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia* II, 6 (126).

<sup>60</sup> Cusa, *De Mente* 5 (85:4) and 3 (73:1-3). *De Sapientia* I (23).

<sup>61</sup> Cusa, *De Mente* 9 (116:13).

<sup>62</sup> Cusa, *De Mente* 9 (117:5-9): "Thus, the measure or end-point of each thing is due to mind. Stones and pieces of wood have a certain measurement—and have end-points—outside our mind; but these [measurements and end-points] are due to the Uncreated Mind, from which all the end-points of things derive."

<sup>63</sup> Cusa, *De Mente* 6 (92:25).

<sup>64</sup> Nicholas holds that number, multitude, and plurality would cease if the One (viz., God) were removed, not if the rational soul were removed (*De Venatione Sapientiae* 21 (61)). Moreover, he endorses Pseudo-Dionysius's judgment that nothing is corruptible according to its nature and substance (*ibid.*, 22 (66)) And he likewise endorses Pseudo-Dionysius's affirmation that "God is the Ordering of all ordered things," (*ibid.*, 30 (90)), so that a thing's being ordered and harmonious does not depend upon the knowing human mind. Finally, Nicholas evidences his proximity to Aristotle (and Aquinas) in this

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late work *De Venatione Sapientiae* (viz., at 21 (61)), just as he also evidenced it in his early work *De Docta Ignorantia* (viz., at I, 18 (53): “Wherefore Aristotle was right in dividing all things in the world into substance and accident”).

<sup>65</sup> Note especially the quotations from Cassirer in n. 9 above.

<sup>66</sup> Cusa, *De Mente* 9 (116:12-13).

<sup>67</sup> Cusa, *De Mente* 6 (88:19-20) and 6 (95:11-13).

<sup>68</sup> Cusa, *De Mente* 6 (93:1-3).

<sup>69</sup> Cusa, *De Mente* 7 (100) and 8 (108:11-12).

<sup>70</sup> Cusa, *De Mente* 4 (78:8-11) and 4 (77:20-22).

<sup>71</sup> See my discussion of Nicholas’s view of *a priori* knowledge, in my *Nicholas of Cusa: Metaphysical Speculations: Volume Two* (Minneapolis: Banning, 2000), pp. 121-139.

<sup>72</sup> See n. 51 above.

<sup>73</sup> Cusa, *De Mente* 4 (76:1-4): “*Philosophus*: Videtur quod sola mens sit dei imago. *Idiota*: Proprie, ita est, quoniam omnia quae post mentem sunt, non sunt dei imago nisi inquantum in ipsis mens ipsa relucet ....”: “*Philosopher*: It seems that only the mind is an image of God. *Layman*: So it is, properly speaking. For all things [ontologically] subsequent to mind are an image of God only insofar as mind shines forth in them ....” See further.

Cf. Cusa, *De Venatione Sapientiae* 29 (86): “Granted that our mind is not the origin of things and does not determine their essences (for this [ontological] prerogative belongs to the Divine Mind), it is the origin of its own operations, which it determines; and in its power all things are enfolded conceptually.”

<sup>74</sup> Josef Koch, *Die Ars coniecturalis, op. cit.* (n. 3 above), pp. 47-48:

“With regard to the subsequent effects of the work [*De Coniecturis*] further questions arise. I will mention only two thinkers: Leibniz and Kant. In Leibniz’s philosophy, especially in the *Monadology*, we find much that reminds us of *De Coniecturis*: the monad as basic concept, the representation of the universe in each thing in that thing’s particular manner, the law of continuous continuity, which Leibniz in his *New Essays on Human Understanding* so strongly emphasizes .... Much more interesting is the line that can be drawn from *De Coniecturis* to

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Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, although here it is evident, from the start, that Kant had no knowledge of Cusa. Yet, the theory of knowledge developed in *De Coniecturis* exhibits an astonishing kinship with the *Critique's* moving from [a consideration of] the unordered sensory-impressions all the way to the unknowable God, by way of the understanding and reason. The Cusan concept of enfolding becomes, with Kant, the *a priori*. The distinction between understanding as the faculty of concepts and reason as the faculty of Ideas is found in both [philosophers]. Of course, the concept of Idea changed. Cusa's view (1) that the understanding orders sensory-impressions and conducts them to itself qua higher unity and his view (2) that reason is the unity for the understanding become, with Kant, the theory that knowing is a synthetic function. Finally, both men conceive of the principle of non-contradiction as a pure law of the understanding. To be sure, Kant is far removed from the view of the coincidence of opposites; for, with Kant, it is not the case that a pre-given absolute unity is the highest factor that produces unity; rather, [the highest such factor] is the transcendental apperception."

All of these claims about Cusa's intellectual lineage in Leibniz and Kant are grossly exaggerated by Koch. For example, it is not unqualifiedly true that Cusa's doctrine of *complicatio* (enfolding) becomes Kant's doctrine of the *a priori*. For Cusa speaks of all concepts—including empirical concepts—as enfolded in the mind (*De Mente* 2 (58:11-13) and 3 (72:15-16)). However, empirical concepts are enfolded in the mind only after the mind abstracts them from sensory images. And *a priori* concepts are enfolded in the mind only after the mind forms them, by its innate power-of-judgment and recognition, on the occasion of stimulation from sensory-impressions. Even Koch himself sees that the comparison between Cusa's notion of the difference between *ratio* (Koch's translation: *Verstand*, i.e., *understanding*) and *intellectus* (Koch's translation: *Vernunft*, i.e. *reason*) and Kant's distinction between *Verstand* and *Vernunft* is farfetched, for he hastens to add that the concept of Idea changed. Moreover, for Kant, speculative metaphysics breaks down, because *Vernunft* encounters the antinomies—a view completely foreign to Cusa. Moreover, Cusa does not regard *intellectus* (*Vernunft*) to be an illicit extension of *ratio* (*Verstand*); nor does he speak of *intellectus* as misapplying categories such as

*substance* and *cause* directly to reality and apart from the mediation of percepts. On the contrary, Nicholas says that there is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses (*De Visione Dei* 24 (107:14-15)) and that the human mind has no concreated concepts (*De Mente* 4 (77)).

Furthermore, Koch sees that Nicholas has no doctrine that resembles Kant's doctrine of the transcendental unity of apperception or no doctrine of the transcendental deduction of the categories, no distinction between the phenomenal self and the noumenal self such that the latter, but not the former, is free. Nor is Koch's comparison between Cusa and Kant regarding the principle of non-contradiction at all significant, given that the framework in which the principle plays a role is totally different for Cusa and for Kant. On Nicholas's view, the fact that nothing can both be and not be the case in the same respect and at the same time holds true whether or not there are any human minds, even though that principle is a prerequisite of all *rational* thinking (vs. *intellectual* thinking) and is assented to by all rational minds as soon as it is heard (*Compendium* 11 (36)). According to Kant, the principle of non-contradiction obtains for *Verstand* but not for *Vernunft*, so that *Vernunft* does not arrive at knowledge, whereas for Nicholas there is no claim that *intellectus* does not attain knowledge. Sometimes Nicholas seems to be suggesting that the principle of non-contradiction does not fully obtain even for the domain of *ratio*. For example, he states that just as in God contradictories coincide (*De Docta Ignorantia* I, 22 (67)), so also opposites can be affirmed (by *ratio*) even of a finite object, with regard to certain given properties: "For since all things are singular, they are both *similar*, because they are singular, and *dissimilar*, because they are singular; [and they are *not similar*, because they are singular], and *not dissimilar*, because they are singular. A corresponding point holds regarding *same* and *different*, *equal* and *unequal*, *singular* and *plural*, *one* and *many*, *even* and *odd*, *concordant* and *discordant*, and the likes, although this [claim] seems absurd to the philosophers who adhere—even in theological matters—to the principle that each thing either is or is not [the case]" (*De Venatione Sapientiae* 22 (67)). However, since, here, the respects differ, Nicholas is not really disavowing the principle of non-contradiction for the domain of *ratio*. For example, one thing is similar to another thing because both



things belong to the *species* of singular things; but the respect in which the two things are dissimilar is that each differs individually (not *specifically*).

Koch's entire comparison between Cusa and Kant is far too facile and tendentious.

<sup>75</sup> See my brief discussion of Cusa and Leibniz on pp. 139-144 of my *Nicholas of Cusa: Metaphysical Speculations: Volume Two, op. cit.* (n. 71 above).

<sup>76</sup> Kurt Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues. Geschichte einer Entwicklung* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1998). See my critique of Flasch on pp. 78-121 of my *Nicholas of Cusa: Metaphysical Speculations: Volume Two, op. cit.* (n. 71 above).

<sup>77</sup> Cassirer, *Individuum, op. cit.* (n. 14 above), p. 19.

<sup>78</sup> Emerich Coreth, p. 15 of his "Nikolaus von Kues, ein Denker an der Zeitwende," pp. 3-16 in Nikolaus Grass, editor, *Cusanus Gedächtnisschrift* (Innsbruck: Universitätsverlag Wagner, 1970).

<sup>79</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966). The 1976 edition was translated by Robert M. Wallace as "*The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*" (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983). Blumenberg attacks Karl Löwith's notion that the Modern Age was somehow "illegitimate" because it was but a deformed secularization of medieval Christianity's eschatology and doctrine of *Heilsgeschichte*.

See, pp. 50-93 of my *Nicholas of Cusa's Dialectical Mysticism* for my appraisal of Blumenberg's depiction of Cusa.

<sup>80</sup> E.g., in various of my books see the bibliographies that list articles on Cusa by philosophers, theologians, and historians from many different nations. In these books are also contained English translations of *all* of Nicholas's major philosophical and theological works. Some of these works, in English translation, are freely available on the webpage: <http://www.cla.umn.edu/jhopkins/>