

**A MISCELLANY  
ON NICHOLAS OF CUSA**

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## ON THE HIDDEN GOD (*De Deo Abscondito*)

A Dialogue between two [discussants]—  
one a pagan, the other a Christian

The *Pagan* spoke: I see that you have most devoutly prostrated yourself and are shedding tears of love-not hypocritical tears but heart-felt ones. Who are you, I ask?

*Christian*: I am a Christian.

*Pagan*: What are you worshipping?

*Christian*: God.

*Pagan*: Who is [this] God whom you worship?

*Christian*: I don't know.

*Pagan*: How is it that you worship so seriously that of which you have no knowledge?

*Christian*: Because I am without knowledge [of Him], I worship [Him].

2 *Pagan*: I marvel that a man is devoted to that of which he has no knowledge.

*Christian*: It is more amazing that a man is devoted to that of which he thinks he has knowledge.

*Pagan*: Why is that?

*Christian*: Because he is more ignorant of that which he thinks he knows than of that which he knows that he does not know.<sup>1</sup>

*Pagan*: Please explain.

*Christian*: Whoever thinks that he knows something, although nothing can be known, seems to me to be irrational.

*Pagan*: It seems to me that *you* are totally void of reason—you who say that nothing can be known.

3 *Christian*: By “knowledge” I understand the apprehension of truth. He who claims to know claims to have apprehended truth.

*Pagan*: I, too, hold this same view.

*Christian*: How, then, can truth be apprehended except through itself? And it is not [thus] apprehended when the act of apprehending precedes the actual apprehension.

*Pagan*: I don't understand the claim that truth cannot be apprehended except through itself

*Christian:* Do you think that [truth] is apprehensible in some way other [than through itself] and that it is apprehensible in something other [than itself]?

*Pagan:* I do.

*Christian:* You are obviously mistaken. For apart from truth there is no truth; apart from circularity there is no circle; apart from humanity there is no human being. Hence, truth is not found to exist apart from truth; nor is it found in some way other [than through itself]; nor is it found in something other [than itself].

4 *Pagan:* How, then, do I know what a man is, what a stone is, and so on regarding each of the things of which I have knowledge?

*Christian:* You do not have knowledge of any of these;<sup>2</sup> instead, you only think that you have knowledge [of them]. For if I ask you about the quiddity of some thing of which you think you have knowledge, you will declare that you cannot express the true essence of man [*veritas hominis*] or the true essence of stone [*veritas lapidis*]. The fact that you know a man not to be a stone derives not from any knowledge by which you have knowledge of man and stone and their difference. Rather, it occurs *per accidens*, on the basis of a difference both of the functions and of the visible forms, to which, when you discern them, you give different names. For a movement in our discriminating reason imposes names.<sup>3</sup>

5 *Pagan:* Is there one truth or more than one?

*Christian:* There is only one. For there is only one oneness; and truth coincides with oneness, since it is true that oneness is one. Therefore, just as in a number there is only one oneness,<sup>4</sup> so in a multitude of things there is only one truth. And so, he who does not attain unto oneness will remain ever without a knowledge of number; and he who does not attain unto the oneness-of-truth cannot know anything truly. And although he thinks that he knows truly, he readily experiences that what-he-thinks-he-knows [can] be known more truly. For example, what is visible can be seen more truly than it is seen by you; for it could be seen more truly by eyes having sharper vision.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is not seen by you as it is seeable in truth. A similar thing obtains regarding hearing and the other senses. Now, whatever is known, yet not by means of that knowledge by which it *can* be known, is known not in truth but otherwise [than in truth] and in a manner other [than it itself is]. But it is not the case that truth is known otherwise [than in truth] and in a manner other than the manner which it itself is.

Hence, he is irrational who thinks that he knows something in truth but who is without a knowledge of truth. Wouldn't that blind man be deemed irrational who thought that he knew the differences between colors when he was without a knowledge of color?

6 *Pagan:* Who among men, then, is knowledgeable, if nothing can be known?<sup>6</sup>

*Christian:* He is to be deemed knowledgeable<sup>7</sup> who knows that he is ignorant. And he honors the truth who recognizes that without truth he cannot apprehend anything or exist as anything or be at all alive or understand anything.

*Pagan:* The desire to be in the truth is, perhaps, what has drawn you unto worship.<sup>8</sup>

*Christian:* What-you-say is right. For I worship God—not the one whom your paganism wrongly supposes it knows and wrongly calls God but rather the God who is ineffable Truth.

7 *Pagan:* I ask you, Brother: since you worship the God who is Truth and since we do not aim to worship a god who is not God in truth, what is the difference between you [Christians] and us [pagans]?

*Christian:* The differences are many. But one [of them]—indeed, the most important one—[consists] in the following: we worship absolute, unintermingled, eternal, and ineffable Truth itself,<sup>9</sup> whereas you worship truth not as it is absolutely in itself but as it is in its works. [You worship] not absolute Oneness but oneness-in-number and oneness-in-multiplicity. Thereby you err, since Truth, which is God, is incommunicable to anything else.

8 *Pagan:* I ask you, Brother, to lead me to the point of being able to understand you regarding your God. Tell me: what do you know about the God you worship?

*Christian:* I know that whatever-I-know is not God and that whatever-I-conceive is not like God but that God excels [all this].<sup>10</sup>

9 *Pagan:* Therefore, God is nothing.

*Christian:* It is not the case that He is nothing, for this nothing has the name “nothing”.<sup>11</sup>

*Pagan:* If He is not nothing, then He is something.

*Christian:* He is not something, either. For something is not everything. And it is not the case that God is something rather than everything.

*Pagan:* You make strange claims: that the God whom you worship is neither nothing nor something. No reasoning grasps this point.

*Christian:* God is beyond nothing and something, for nothing [or not-being] obeys Him in order that something be made.<sup>12</sup> And this is His omnipotence, by which power He excels all that which either is or is not, so that that-which-is-not obeys Him, even as does that-which-is. For He makes not-being pass into being and makes being pass into not-being.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, He is not any of the things that are subordinate to Him and which His omnipotence precedes.<sup>14</sup> And, accordingly, He cannot be said to be *this* rather than *that*, since all things are from Him.

**10** *Pagan:* Can He be named?

*Christian:* What can be named is small. That whose greatness cannot be conceived remains ineffable.

*Pagan:* But is He ineffable?

*Christian:* He is not ineffable, though He is beyond all things effable; for He is the Cause of all nameable things.

How is it, then, that He Himself, who gives to others a name, is without a name?

*Pagan:* So He is both effable and ineffable.

*Christian:* Not *that* either. For God is not the foundation of contradiction but is Simplicity, which is prior to every foundation. Hence, we are also not to say that He is both effable and ineffable.

*Pagan:* What, then, will you say of Him?

*Christian:* That it is neither the case that He is named or is not named nor the case that He both is named and is not named. Rather, whatever can be said disjunctively or conjunctively, whether consistently or contradictorily, does not befit Him (because of the excellence of His infinity), so that He is the one Beginning,<sup>15</sup> which is prior to every thought formable of it.

**11** *Pagan:* So, then, *being* would not befit God.<sup>16</sup>

*Christian:* Your statement is correct.

*Pagan:* Therefore, He is nothing.<sup>17</sup>

*Christian:* It is not the case that He is nothing or that He is not nothing; nor is He both nothing and not nothing. Rather, He is the Source and Origin of all the beginnings of being and of not-being.<sup>18</sup>

*Pagan:* God is the Source of the beginnings of being and of not-being?

*Christian:* No.

*Pagan:* But you just said this.

*Christian:* When I said it, I spoke the truth; and I am speaking

the truth now, when I deny it. For if there are any beginnings of being and of not-being, God precedes them. However, not-being does not have a beginning of its not being but has only a beginning of its being. For not-being needs a beginning in order to be. In this way, then, He is the Beginning of not-being, because without Him there would not be not-being.<sup>19</sup>

12 *Pagan:* Is God Truth?<sup>20</sup>

*Christian:* No. Yet He precedes all truth.

*Pagan:* Is He *other* than truth?

*Christian:* No. For otherness cannot befit Him.<sup>21</sup> But in an infinitely excellent way He is prior to whatever is conceived and named by us as truth.

13 *Pagan:* Don't you [Christians] name God *God*?

*Christian:* We do.

*Pagan:* [In so doing,] are you saying what is true or saying what is false?

*Christian:* Neither the one nor the other nor both. For we do not call true the statement that “God” is His name; nor do we call that statement false, for it is not false that “God” is His name. Nor do we say that the statement is both true and false, since His simplicity precedes both all nameable things and all unnameable things.<sup>22</sup>

*Pagan:* Why do you [Christians] use the name “God” of Him whose name you do not know?

*Christian:* Because of a similarity of perfection.

*Pagan:* Please explain.

14 *Christian:* “*Deus*” is derived from [the Greek verb] “*theoro*,” that is, “I see.”<sup>23</sup> For as sight is to the realm of color, so God is to our realm. For color is not apprehended in any way other than by sight; and in order that sight can readily apprehend every color, the center of sight is without color. Therefore, sight is not present in the realm of color, since sight is without color.<sup>24</sup> Hence, with respect to the realm of color sight is nothing rather than something. For the realm of color does not attain unto being that is outside its own realm; instead, it affirms the being of all that is present in its own realm, where it does not find sight. Therefore, sight, since it is without color, is unnameable within the realm of color, for the name of no color corresponds to it. However, through its power of discrimination sight has given a name to each color. Hence, in the realm of color: all naming depends on sight, but the name of sight—from which<sup>25</sup> every name

derives—is thought to be the name of nothing rather than of something. So, then, God is to all things as sight is to things visible.<sup>26</sup>

- 15** *Pagan:* What you have said pleases me. And I understand clearly (1) that in the realm of all creatures neither God nor His name is found and (2) that God escapes all conception<sup>27</sup> rather than being affirmed to be something. For in the realm of creatures that which escapes the condition of creation is not found. Furthermore, in the realm of composites the incomposite is not found. Now, all names that are named are of composites. But a composite does not derive from itself but derives from that which precedes every composite. And although both the realm of composites and all the composites themselves *are* through the incomposite that which they are, nevertheless since [the incomposite] is not composite, it is not known within the realm of composites.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, may God, who is hidden from the eyes of all the wise of the world, be blessed forever.



## ABBREVIATIONS

- Ap.* *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* [Vol. II (edited by Raymond Klibansky) of *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia* (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 1932)].
- CA* *Cribratio Alkorani* [Vol. VIII (edited by Ludwig Hagemann) of *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia* (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 1986)].
- DI* *De Docta Ignorantia* [Latin-German edition: *Schriften des Nikolaus von Kues in deutscher Übersetzung*, published by Meiner Verlag. **Book I** (Vol. 264a), edited and translated by Paul Wilpert; 3rd edition with minor improvements by Hans G. Senger, 1979. **Book II** (Vol. 264b), edited and translated by Paul Wilpert; 2nd edition with minor improvements by Hans G. Senger, 1977. **Book III** (Vol. 264c), Latin text edited by Raymond Klibansky; introduction and translation by Hans G. Senger, 1977].
- DP* *De Possess* [Latin text contained in J. Hopkins, *A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa* (Minneapolis: Banning Press, 3rd ed., 1986)].
- DVD* *De Visione Dei* [Latin text contained in J. Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Dialectical Mysticism: Text, Translation, and Interpretive Study of De Visione Dei* (Minneapolis: Banning Press, 2nd ed., 1988)].
- MFCG* *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft*, edited by Rudolf Haubst *et al.* A continuing series published in Mainz, Germany by Matthias-Grünwald Verlag.
- NA* *De Li Non Aliud* [Latin text contained in J. Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on God as Not-other: A Translation and an Appraisal of De Li Non Aliud* (Minneapolis: Banning Press, 3rd ed., 1987)].
- PF* *De Pace Fidei* [Vol. VII (edited by Raymond Klibansky and Hildebrand Bascour) of *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia* (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 1970)].
- PL* *Patrologia Latina*, edited by J.-P. Migne. Series published in Paris.
- TB* Theodor Bibliander, editor, *Machumetis Sarracenorum Principis Vita ac Doctrina*. Zurich, 1550 (2nd ed.).
- VS* *De Venatione Sapientiae* [Vol. XII (edited by Raymond Klibansky and Hans G. Senger) of *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia* (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 1982)].

## PRAENOTANDA

1. All references to Nicholas of Cusa's works are to the Latin texts—specifically to the following texts in the following editions (unless explicitly indicated otherwise):

A. Heidelberg Academy edition of *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia: De Concordantia Catholica; Sermones; De Coniecturis; De Deo Abscondito; De Quaerendo Deum; De Filiatione Dei; De Dato Patris Luminum; Coniectura de Ultimis Diebus; De Genesi; Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae; Idiota* (1983 edition) *de Sapientia, de Mente, de Staticis Experimentis; De Pace Fidei; De Beryllo* (1988); *Cribratio Alkorani; De Principio; De Venatione Sapientiae; Compendium; De Apice Theoriae*.

B. Texts authorized by the Heidelberg Academy and published in the Latin-German editions of Felix Meiner Verlag's Philosophische Bibliothek: *De Docta Ignorantia*.

C. Editions by J. Hopkins: *De Visione Dei* (1988); *De Possess* (1986); *De Li Non Aliud* (1987).

The references given for some of these treatises indicate book and chapter, for others margin number and line, and for still others page and line. Readers should have no difficulty determining which is which when they consult the particular Latin text. E.g., 'DI II, 6 (125:19-20)' indicates *De Docta Ignorantia*, Book II, Chap. 6, margin number 125, lines 19-20.

2. All references to the Koran are in terms of the English translation by Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall (Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1980 printing). A reference such as 'Surah 7:29' indicates Surah 7, verse 29.

3. References to the Bible are given in terms of the Douay version. (References to chapters and verses of the Psalms include, in parentheses, the King James' locations.) English translations of the Vulgate are sometimes taken from the Douay version, whether *in locis* this borrowing is explicitly indicated or not.

4. Where, for purposes of clarification, words from the Latin text are inserted into the translations, the following rule is employed: when the Latin term is noted exactly as it appears in the Latin text, parentheses are used; when the case endings of nouns are transformed to the nominative, brackets are used.

5. American-style punctuation is used, except where clarity occasionally requires placing a comma or a period outside of quotation marks.

## NOTES TO *DE DEO ABSCONDITO*

1. In this dialogue, completed before 1445, Nicholas is not maintaining that human beings know nothing at all. For otherwise he would not here be referring to one's *knowing* that he does not know. His claim is that finite minds can never know *precisely* what anything is, that they can never know the truth absolutely. Insofar as finite beings perceive or conceive, they never altogether escape the restrictions of perspective and point-of-view. Accordingly, only God, who is infinite, has knowledge of *what* finite things are and of *what* His own infinite being is. Human beings, teaches Nicholas, may know *that* various objects in the world exist and regularly have such-and-such characteristics as observed. But human minds cannot penetrate to the exact essence of any given thing. Similarly, although they may indeed know of God's existence, they will never—not even in the next life—be able to discern God's nature as it is in itself. What we ordinarily call empirical knowledge or metaphysical knowledge, Nicholas elsewhere labels *surmise* (*coniectura*). And there he defines "*coniectura*" as "*Positiva assertio, in alteritate veritatem, uti est, participans*": "an affirmation that with some degree of otherness partakes of the truth as it is" [*De Coniecturis* I, 11 (57: 10-11)]. Nicholas's restriction of the term "knowledge" to cases of precise knowledge is reminiscent of Plato's distinction, in the *Republic*, between *episteme* and *doxa*. However, Nicholas's strategy differs fundamentally from Plato's. For whereas Plato presumes that philosopher-kings will have attained unto some precise knowledge through an intellectual "vision" of the Forms, Nicholas supposes that the intellects of men (and of angels) can never attain unto the precise nature of anything. The dialogue *De Deo Abscondito* (written prior to 1445) repeats this point from *De Docta Ignorantia* (1440). For at the outset of *De Docta Ignorantia*, in I, 2 (8:9-10), Nicholas declared: ". . . learned ignorance has its basis in the fact that the precise truth is inapprehensible." And even in the last book of that treatise, in III, 1 (189:14), he notes that "of all [individuals] we cannot know even one perfectly." (This view is reasserted in *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* 22:5-6 and 28:8-13.) Similarly, he agrees with the advocates of the *via negativa* that God "is not knowable either in this world or in the world to come. . . but is known only to Himself" [*DI* 1, 26 (88:16-20)]. (This view is also reasserted in *Ap.* 13 and *Ap.* 18-2 1.)

As for mathematical knowledge, Nicholas regards it as precise-but at the price of being neither empirical nor metaphysical. [In *DP* 44 he briefly discusses mathematical knowledge. Cf. *De Coniecturis* II, 1 (75), which imposes a qualification, by distinguishing *ratio* from *intellectus*.]

2. Cf. *DI* I, 3 (10:18-19): "Therefore, the quiddity of things, which is the truth of beings, is unattainable in its purity . . ." Note also *DVD* 22 (96:20-21): "Except for You, O Jesus, no one constituted of flesh has ever seen the substance of things or the quiddity of things." See also *Ap.* 28:8-13 and *De Genesi* 1 (143:8-9).

3. Cf. *De Coniecturis* I, 8 (32:3-4): "Sensus enim sentit et non discernit. Omnis enim discretio a ratione est . . ." See also *De Quaerendo Deum* 2 (35:8 and 36:1-2), where "*ratio discretiva*" is mentioned.

4. *DI* I, 5 (14:1-4): "However, oneness cannot be number; for number, which

can be comparatively greater, cannot at all be either an unqualifiedly minimum or an unqualifiedly maximum. Rather, oneness is the beginning of all number, because it is the minimum; and it is the end of all number, because it is the maximum” *DI* II, 3 (105-.14-16): “And just as in number, which is the unfolding of oneness, we find only oneness, so in all existing things we find only the Maximum.” *Ap.* 16:24 - 17:1: “For number is not oneness, although every number is enfolded in oneness, even as the caused [is enfolded] in the cause. But that which we understand as number is the unfolding of the power of oneness” See also *Ap.* 17:25 - 18:3: “And yet, He is all in all, even as the one is all things in all numbers. For were the one removed, number could not continue to be; for number can exist only through the one. And because the one is every number, (not numerically but by way of enfolding), it is not any number.”

5. For a reliable discussion of Nicholas's appeal to the notion of perspective see Karsten Harries' article “The Infinite Sphere: Comments on the History of a Metaphor,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 13 (January 1975), 5-15.

6. Those who emphasize Nicholas's modernity and his anticipation of German Idealism point to passages such as this one, which implies (1) that only knowledge of the whole rightly qualifies as knowledge and (2) that only the Absolute (*viz.*, God) has knowledge in this sense.

7. Nicholas is not endorsing radical skepticism. See n. 1 above.

8. Cf. John 3:21.

9. *DI* III, 1 (182), opening sentence.

10. “For all the [symbolic] likenesses proposed by the saints (including the most divine Dionysius) are altogether disproportional [to God]; and to all who do not have learned ignorance (*i.e.*, a knowledge of the fact that [the likenesses] are altogether disproportional), [the likenesses] are useless rather than useful. However, in Book One of *Learned Ignorance* enough (though disproportionately less than could be said) is found stated about these matters ...” *Ap.* 24:19-24. See also *DVD* 13 (52).

11. Cf. *Ap.* 20:2-8: “For God is found when all things are left behind; and this darkness is light in the Lord. And in that very learned ignorance we approach nearer to God, as all the sages both before and after Dionysius have attempted [to do]. Hence, the first Greek commentator on Dionysius said: ‘Whoever desires to attain unto God seems to ascend unto nothing rather than unto something; for God is not found except by one who leaves behind all things.’ ”

Note also *DI* I, 4 (12:4-11): “Therefore, because the absolutely Maximum is absolutely and actually all things which can be (and is so free of all opposition that the Minimum coincides with it), it is beyond both all affirmation and all negation. And it is not, as well as is, all that which is conceived to be; and it is, as well as is not, all that which is conceived not to be. But it is a given-thing in such way that it is all things; and it is all things in such way that it is no thing; and it is maximally a given thing in such way that it is it minimally.”

12. *DP* 5:7: “... to create is to bring forth from not-being to being.”

13. Nicholas says in Section 11 below that not-being in some sense *is*. Though certain themes in his writings *foreshadow* their reappearance in Hegel and the other German Idealists, Nicholas cannot properly be called a *forerunner* of Idealism. See n. 6 above.

14. *Ap.* 17:22-25: “. . . God is present at every place non-spatially, just as He

is great without quantity. Similarly, He *is* every place non-spatially, every time non-temporally, and every existent non-existent. But He is not on this account any existent thing, even as He is not any place or any time.”

15. *DI* 1, 19 (57:13-17). *DP* 45:12-13.

16. *DP* 26: “From this point you will be able to elevate yourself so that, though ineffably and through a symbolism, you will behold above being and not-being all the things which—from not-being and through Being-which-is-actually-all-things—come into being. And where you behold this [sight] you find no name which can be named by us with complete truth and complete distinctness. For neither the name ‘oneness’ nor ‘singularity’ nor ‘plurality’ nor ‘multitude’ nor any other name which is nameable or understandable by us befits that Beginning. For *there* being and not-being do not contradict each other—nor do any other opposites which either affirm or deny a distinct state of affairs. For the name of this Beginning is the Name of names; it is no more a singular name for individual things than it is a universal name for both everything and nothing.”

17. *Ap.* 20:5-8.

18. *NA* 115 (#5): “If anyone sees that *Not-other* defines the beginning—since the beginning is not other than the beginning—he sees that *Not-other* is the Beginning of beginning; and he sees that it is also the Middle of middle, the End of end, the Name of name, the Being of being, the *Not-being* of not-being, and so on for each and every thing which can be spoken of or thought of.”

19. *DP* 25:11-17: “For since not-being is able to exist through the Almighty, assuredly it is actual, since absolute possibility is actual in the Almighty. For if some thing is able to be made from not-being by some power, assuredly [this thing] is enfolded within Infinite Power. Hence, *there* not-being is being everything. And so, every creature which is able to be brought from not-being into being exists *there*, where to-be-able-[to-be] is to be, and *there* it is Actualized-possibility itself.” Cf. *DP* 51:9-10: “Therefore, in the perfection of the First Beginning it is necessary that there be present the perfection of all things which can have a beginning” God, who is the Beginning of not-being, nonetheless precedes not-being in the sense that in Him not-being and being are not distinguishable, for God, in Himself, is undifferentiated Infinity. He is the Beginning of not-being in that without Him not-being would not be. Not-being, however, is not a created *thing*. See *DP* 26:4-11 and *DP* 5:6. Even here in *De Deo Abscondito*, viz., at 10:16-17, Nicholas refers to God as “the one Beginning, which is prior to every thought formable of it.”

20. John 14:6.

21. *DVD* 15 (65:20-21): “But Infinity, as it exists actually, is without otherness; and it cannot exist without existing as oneness.” See also *DVD* 14 (60). *NA* 7: 20-24: “. . . you now recognize clearly regarding the expression ‘Not-other’ that its signification not only serves us as a way to the Beginning but also quite closely befigures the unnameable name of God, so that in this signification—just as in a quite precious symbolism—[God] shines forth to those who are searching” See also *DP* 59:10-14.

22. Cf. *De Sapientia* II (32:10-24).

23. *De Quaerendo Deum* I (19).

24. *De Quaerendo Deum* I (20:4 -11).

25. The pronoun “which” has reference to the power-of-sight, not to the name

“sight”.

26. *De Quaerendo Deum* 3 (3 8:2- 10).

27. Another way of putting the point that God escapes all conception is to declare all conception of His quiddity to be *symbolical*. Nicholas takes this latter approach when he searches for illustrative symbols such as “*possest*,” “*non-aliud*,” “*posse ipsum*,” “*ipsum esse*,” “*idem absolutum*.”

28. *DI I*, 24 (77:1-4): “For who could understand the infinite Oneness which infinitely precedes all opposition?—where all things are incompositely enfolded in simplicity of Oneness, where there is neither anything which is other nor anything which is different ....”