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NICHOLAS OF CUSA AND IBN 'ARABĪ: TWO PHILOSOPHIES OF MYSTICISM

Andrey V. Smirnov

The rich traditions of European and Arabic mysticism were both made the subject of philosophical reflection. In this essay, I will investigate the way in which the mystical outlook was rationalized in the philosophies of Nicholas of Cusa and Ibn 'Arabī. The fundamental differences between these two thinkers may be revealed by exposing their treatment of such essential problems as the relation of God to the world, the place and role of humanity in the world, and humanity's cognitive potential. In the final part of the essay, I will analyze the implications of these two philosophies for the subsequent development of Western and Arabic philosophical thought.

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I

The common basis underlying a philosophical exploration of Nicholas of Cusa and Ibn 'Arabī could perhaps be presented in the form of two closely linked assertions: first, the thesis that *God is indefinable*, and, second, a formula which states that *the world is not God but is not anything other than God*. These assertions were certainly not unknown to medieval thinkers, but it was the mystical tradition (European as well as Islamic) that gave them rather uncommon sense. What distinguished the mystics also was their close, perhaps unbroken, linking of these two assertions.

The mystics understood the indefinableness of God in a far wider sense than did other medieval philosophers and thinkers. Indefinableness, as the mystics put it, traverses the limits of the indefinable in the sense of Aristotelian logic. For anything to be indefinable *per genus et differentiam* does not exclude at all the possibility of *description*, and description is, of course, stating something *definite* about the thing described.¹ But the indefinableness of God in a mystical sense comes in fact to be indefiniteness; that is, it rules out any definite proposition about the Divine essence. Any such proposition means a sort of limitation imposed on the Divine, while the latter is incompatible with any limit. The ontological unlimitedness of God entails for a mystic an epistemological indefiniteness: any assertion about God would then be only metaphorical and would not serve as an established basis of knowledge. For the same reason, indefinableness in a mystical sense is in no sense equal to the negation of some (or even all) of the attributes of the Divine essence: such a negative definition nevertheless establishes a certain limit to God, though formulated in terms of negation.²

Furthermore, the indefinableness of God was never an obstacle for the medieval philosopher (never an unsurmountable obstacle, at any

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rate) on his way to philosophical cognition of the world.³ But if you say that *the world is not anything other than God*, bearing in mind God's indefinableness in the sense mentioned above (what perhaps could be called an absolute indefinableness), then the world, too, turns out to be quite indefinite, and not only can no certain knowledge be achieved about God, it cannot be achieved about the world as well. This raises doubts about the very core of philosophical thinking, that is, about the possibility of a rational and coherent discourse on the Universe. To answer this challenge, a mystical philosopher should demonstrate that such assertions about God and world are possible—that they do not break the conditions just mentioned of God's indefinableness and the mutual non-otherness of God and world.

Nicholas of Cusa and Ibn 'Arabī both responded to this challenge, proceeding from the same point but along different lines.

II

Two possibilities exist to construct propositions that do not predicate *something* to the subject. To avoid *something* you must turn it either into *everything* or into *nothing* (*nothing* and *everything* are not *something definite* and so do not contradict the condition that the proposition about God should be *indefinite*). Thus, in the first case, we arrive at the notion of God as an absolute and exhaustive presentation of everything that exists or could ever come into existence. In this case, no limit can ever reach the Divine essence because, since it embraces everything, there is nothing exterior to it, whereas the notion of limitation always presupposes something being outside the limited. To further clarify this point, we can say that the Divine essence contains every possible limit *within* itself and by that very fact transcends all limits. In the second case, the indefinableness of God means that God is an absolute nothing of existent things: this "nothing" is to signify that God is unlimited because God is already there *before* any limit can emerge; these limits, which are regarded to be "something," are unable to impose any bounds on the *Absolute Nothing* that constitutes the possibility of their emergence. To sum up, God is indefinable in the first case because God embraces all the limits, and in the second case because God precedes any limit.

Thus, the mystical idea of an indefinable God can be rationally interpreted either as an absolute *Everything* or an absolute *Nothing*. But this formula is not yet complete. Since the world, according to the mystics, is not something *other* than God, then the Divine *Everything* and *Nothing* should embrace the concept of the world. The mystical formula stating that *the world is not God but is not anything other than God*, if translated into the language of philosophy, indicates that the Divine essence is as much transcendent as immanent in the world, that this category should be understood as distinct, and at the same time indis-

tinct, from the notion of the world, as unequal and equal to it. That is to say, the notion of God as *Everything* or *Nothing* must be completed with the notion of the world: God is either *Nothing-of-the-world* or *Everything-of-the-world*.

Since the Divine essence is eternal while the existence of any essence in the world is temporal, the following could be added. Eternity can be interpreted either as *temporal Nothing*, and in this case time will be understood as eternity made explicit, or as *temporal Everything*, with time to be understood as an exemplification and representation of eternity.

So, there are two possible ways of rationalizing the mystical concept of an indefinable God: either as Divine Nothing making itself *explicit* as the world, or as Divine Everything having the world as its *reflection*.⁴ We can find these logically possible interpretations of the mystical outlook in the philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa and Ibn 'Arabī.

III

According to Nicholas of Cusa, the relation of God to the world must be understood as the relation of "rolled up," or "enveloped" (*complicatio*), to "unrolled," or "developed" (*explicatio*). Any state of things that we can expect to find in the world is the *development* of what is *rolled up* in God. This does not mean, however, that the "rolled up" becomes "unrolled"; no, the *rolled up-in-itself* always stays rolled up and as such remains a never-displayed and never-discovered abundance of possibilities. The category of the *rolled up* signifies an ideal principle that brings into existence all of the *unrolled* (that is, all the forms to be found in the world) but nevertheless never ceases to be rolled up. It is only logically that the *rolled up* precedes the *unrolled*, while ontologically they always come together.

The examples of the *complicatio-explicatio* relation given by Nicholas of Cusa are full of grace and charm. A line, he says, is a rolled up angle: choosing any point of the line and moving what is to the left of it (or it could be to the right as well) while the rest of the line remains fixed, we gradually create all the possible angles. So, which of the two is more worthy to be merited with the name of an angle: a concrete angle or the line out of which all the possible angles are *developed*? Of course, the latter is more an angle than any of the given angles, only because it embraces and contains all of them.⁵

So, the continuity of our existence is a continuity of the unrolling process. The rolled up is ceaselessly unrolling itself, and in each of the developed states it is present no less than in any other. This is why one can say that God is omnipresent, the intimate core of every thing, the beginning and the end of anything—while nevertheless not *something* of-the-world.

Thus, the world is not God because none of its states develops *all* of Andrey V. Smirnov

the Divine *complicatio*, and it is not something other than God because it is exactly the Divine *complicatio* that is unrolling itself and giving existence to the world. It is not too difficult to notice that the *unrolled* (the world) equals the *rolled up* (Divine), both logically and ontologically, only in the ideal case of *absolute unrolledness*: since the eternal *rolled up* unrolls itself in temporal forms, their ontological equality presupposes an absolute temporal unrolledness, that is, the endlessness of time.

Having accepted this concept of the relation of God-to-world, we must then answer the following questions: *what* is that which we refer to as “rolled up,” *how* is it unrolling itself, and *why* does it not stay rolled up?

To answer the first question is to unveil the meaning of the expression *Nothing-of-the-world*.⁶ To do that, we have to describe God as the rolled-up world, in philosophical terms. How can this be done?

Following Nicholas of Cusa, we notice that by virtue of its logical precedence to the unrolled, the rolled up precedes all the opposites that could be found in the unrolled world. The line considered a rolled-up angle is not just devoid of obtuse-acute opposition but logically precedes the very possibility for such an opposition to emerge, and it is the same way for the *rolled up*: “absolute simplicity knows no distinction between one and another,” for it is “on the other side of the coincidence of opposites.”⁷

This being so, what can be said about this “absolute simplicity”? It was in a rather easy and witty way that Nicholas of Cusa found his solution in rolling up the angles (which resulted in a line) or the lines and spheres (resulting in a dot). In the general case that we are now dealing with, we could expect the solution to be, if not as easy as previously, then at least possible. However, this is what he says: “Oh my Lord, the Supporter to those who seek You, I see You in the garden of Eden and do not know what that is which I see, for I don’t see anything visible, and only this I know: I know that I don’t know what that is which I see, and shall never be able to know that.”⁸ When we deal not with the particular but with the general case, in which we have to stand above *all* the possible opposites and not only the given concrete ones, the usual language is no longer applicable. The philosophical discourse uses categories to which the opposites always exist: if you have “A,” you have “non-A” as well. To speak of God as a *rolled-up world*, Nicholas of Cusa has to find a new, nondiscursive language. This is by no means an easy task; however, there seems to be at least a clue to its solution. Concepts that are used in discourse and to which there are always opposites are limited; thus, the category which would express our concept of the Divine *complicatio* should be unlimited: “The one who approaches You must stand above any limit and bounds and traverse all that is finite.”⁹

Philosophy East & West But what would such a category be? Nicholas himself seems to be embarrassed: “But how will he reach You, the longed-for extreme, if

he has to leave behind every extreme and every limit? The one who traverses everything finite, does he not find himself in the realm of the totally indefinite, that is, the intellectually imperceptible, indistinct, and vague?"¹⁰ However, the needed category can be found; in fact, it is already there. What has no limit and stands above any limit should be called *infinite*, but this infinity comes *before* any limitation and any definition can emerge: it is an *absolutely indefinite infinity*. Such infinity, Cusanus says, "is the very simplicity of all that could be spoken of and given name to."¹¹

This category is supposed to precede logically all the oppositions rolling up into itself and thus embracing them; this is why "infinity is everything in a way that it is nothing of everything."¹² But will this formula help us understand *what* infinity is? If it is the very simplicity of everything that can be named, then infinity, simplicity itself, cannot be given any name: the concept we have found turns out to be empty of any content (because "to name" means, for Nicholas of Cusa, as it used to for medieval philosophers, to give the ultimate description of essence). And though it is true that, a few pages before, Cusanus says that "there can be no contradiction without differentiation, while differentiation exists in the simplicity of unity without producing differences"—hence "everything we say about absolute simplicity coincides with it, for in its possession is existence, opposition of opposites is opposition without opposing, and the limit of all definite things is an infinite limit"¹³—he is by no means trying to make his *absolute simplicity* gain all the infinite variety of qualities with the help of this sophisticated verbal dialectic. Following the clear logic of his reasoning, he acknowledges that his concept of infinity is *devoid of any quality*: "infinite goodness is not goodness but an infinity; and infinite quantity is not quantity but an infinity, this being true for everything."¹⁴

Having found the category needed to denote the *rolled-up world*, we come to discover that this absolute simplicity, being devoid of all qualities, cannot *as such, by itself* produce the qualitative *unrolled*. There needs to be something external and not encompassed by the *rolled up* to unroll it into qualitiveness. Simple infinity, however, leaves no place for such an external "something," for it rolls up (that is, contains within itself) everything. If so, then one cannot comprehend the very possibility of *unrolled* to exist, since the *rolled up* (which logically precedes the *unrolled*) is an absolutely simple infinity, and as such it cannot develop itself into a qualitative world.¹⁵

Seeking another concept to denote the Divine *complicatio*, Nicholas of Cusa gradually finds it. The absolutely simple and devoid-of-all-qualities Divine infinity contains no *otherness*: in this infinity one cannot be related to another as *other*, because "one" and "another" are not differentiated. Moreover, the *rolled up* is not anything "other" than the

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unrolled, for it is exactly the *rolled up* that is being developed and is giving birth to the unrolled world. That is why we may call God the *non-other*.¹⁶ non-other in God's relation to the world.

The *non-other*, Nicholas says with the help of a participant in his dialogue, "is what I was looking for all the long years through the coincidence of opposites"; the non-other "is to be seen before any affirmation or negation";¹⁷ it comes before any positive category, be it eternity, truth, existence or unity.¹⁸ At the same time "the non-other exists before everything so that it cannot but be present in all that appears after it, even when one of it is opposite to another,"¹⁹ and this *non-other* is "the principle of existence and knowledge."²⁰

Now, is it possible to find the positive content of this concept as such? The *non-other* fits well to denote the *rolled up in its relation* to the *unrolled*, but what is the *rolled up as such, before we speak of the unrolled*? This is the answer: "All that can be said or contemplated, cannot be that first, denoted by the non-other, for the reason that all of it exists as other in relation to its opposites."²¹

Both *simple infinitude* and *non-other* are empty categories with no positive content if contemplated in and of themselves, outside their relation to the unrolled world. The *rolled up* makes sense only as a rolled-up unrolledness, and God can be contemplated only in God's relation with the world. God-as-such would be *Nothing*, but this *Nothing* is always *Nothing-of-the-world* and not *Nothing-in-itself*, and that is why it makes sense.²²

Thus, the rolled-up prime foundation is not "other" than any thing, and in this sense it stands in the same relation to everything. What stands *exterior* to everything and at the same time can be understood only *in its relation to* everything is to be called *measure*, Nicholas of Cusa says.

Infinitude is not *more* and is not *less* than anything, and does not equal anything. But to contemplate it in this way—as not being more or less than anything—means to say that it is the measure of everything, being not more and not less than anything; that is, it is to understand it as equality of existence. Such equality is also infinitude; that is to say, it is not an equality in a way that to this equality as equal an unequal is opposed, but so that the inequality in it is equality: inequality dwells in the infinitude without inequality as long as it is an infinitude. And an equality in infinitude is an infinitude. The infinite equality is an unlimited limit. Though it is not *more* and is not *less*, it is not such as a concrete equality should be understood: it is an infinite equality that could never grow or reduce, which means that it equals one no more than it equals any other, being equal to one so that it equals all together, and equaling all so that it equals none of them.²³

Philosophy East & West This measure that rolls up all things constitutes the basis of their existence: "The non-other is the most adequate concept, differentiation, and

measure for all that exist to be existent, and for all nonexistent to be nonexistent.”²⁴

Thus, the *rolled up*, the *Nothing-of-the-world*, is a measure of all things: it is *co*-measuring them and giving them their *true* measure. This category seems to express the needed connection of the prime principle devoid of qualities (the *rolled up*) to the qualitative world (the *unrolled*), for the quantitative measure is at the same time a measure of quality. However, the *measure* (exactly as the rolled-up prime principle should be) is free of an opposition of quality and quantity: this category comes before such opposition and constitutes its basis.

The category of measure provides an answer to the second question: how does the rolled up unroll itself? To be a measure, it must be engaged in a constant process of *measuring*; by measuring the simple rolled-up infinitude (that is, by measuring *itself*), it produces the infinitude of the qualitative measured world.

Up until now I have tried to show the logical interconnection and the necessity of the conclusions drawn by Nicholas of Cusa. But here we come to the crucial point at which he takes an arbitrary step; the importance of it, however, is difficult to exaggerate. Taking as a basis the Latin etymology, he derives *measure* from *mind*: “It is the mind (*mens*) from which the bounds and measure (*mensura*) of the things emerge. So I assume that it is called *mens* because of *mensurare*.”²⁵ This *mind*, Nicholas of Cusa says, is simple infinitude, the measure of itself.

Now comes the second arbitrary step. The cognitive capacity that we find in a human being, Cusanus says, is also called *mind*, and this human mind bears resemblance to the Divine mind and is affined to it. “The mind in itself is one, and the mind inhabiting a body is another. The mind by itself is either infinite or an image of the infinite. Of those minds that are an image of this infinite—they being not by themselves, not maximum, not absolute, and not infinite—some may, I agree, animate the human body. Then by their activity I call them souls.”²⁶

Nicholas of Cusa does not explain the meaning of the word *image*, which he uses to denote the relation of the human mind to the Divine one. However, it is clear that the human mind is not an essence (as the Divine mind is). Would it be so, a contradiction would be inevitable: this supposed essence belongs either to the *rolled up*, in which case it is equal to the Divine mind, since there are no differences in the *rolled up*, or to the realm of the *unrolled*, in which the Divine mind, being its measure, stands in the same relation to all things, and so it is impossible to justify this peculiarity of the human mind (for no other essence is an image of the Divine mind).

This is why not an essence but a specific *ability* of man must be denoted by “human mind.” “The non-other itself, the basis of things, discloses, that is, makes itself visible, to your basis, which is your mind,”

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Cusanus says.²⁷ The mind is not a faculty of discourse and giving definitions,²⁸ for the *rolled up* is indefinable (being above all the names and denotations of which each has an opposite), and if it makes itself visible to the human mind, then the latter stands above the opposites, too. This is why “the mind’s thinking contains what neither sensation nor reason grasp, that is, the prime image and the incommunicable truth of forms that shines in sensible things.”²⁹ The human mind is an ability *to become similar* to the *rolled up*, to roll up all the things in itself as they are rolled up in the prime basis: “As God rolls up all of the rolled up, so the mind, the image of God, is an image of rolling up the rolled up. . . . From here [we] proceed to the conclusion about the wonderful capacity of our mind: in it dwells a force similar to the rolling-up force of a dot, which enables the mind to become similar to any magnitude. . . . Due to its being an image of the absolute rolling-up force, meant by the latter the infinite mind, our mind is able to gain similarity to any rolling up.”³⁰ The category of *mind* expresses the ability of man to discover *in himself* that rolled-up prime principle, that very *Nothing-of-the-world*, which develops itself as the infinite Universe. Accordingly, “thinking turns out to be the creation of things for the Divine mind, and the gaining of concepts of things for our mind. If the Divine mind is an absolute essence, then its thinking is the creation of the existent; as for our mind, to think means to become similar to the existent.”³¹

Hence, we come to a conclusion which, however extravagant it may sound, is deeply grounded in the preceding arguments and backed up by them: the human mind is self-sufficient for the true and adequate cognition of the world. “*Philosopher*: Where does the mind gain this force of judgement from? For it seems to make statements about everything. *The idiot*: It possesses it by virtue of being an image of the prime image of everything; and this prime image of everything is God. Hence, insofar as the prime image of everything is reflected in mind, like truth reflected in its image, *the mind*, when judging what lies exterior to it, *possesses in itself what it is looking at* and what it conforms with.”³² The human mind comprises *in advance* all that it is able to discover in the outside world, and everything the mind finds in itself stands true—provided that it is a genuine mind, that is, a realization of man’s ability to gain similarity to the rolled-up basis of the world, its *Nothing*.³³

And one more conclusion. Since the rolled-up foundation of the world is an integral unity, the rules of its unrolling are also integral (I say *rules* because the *measure*, by the very fact of measuring, is ruling the process of self-unrolling). It means that everything is interrelated and interdependent, and that the absolute knowledge of any arbitrary chosen thing in the Universe is equal to the cognition of all the domain of existence. But the reverse is also true: we cannot achieve an exhaustive knowledge of anything until we know the integral law that governs the process of unrolling. “It is God who is the exactness of any given thing.

So, had we in our possession the exact knowledge of one thing, we would inevitably have gained a knowledge of everything. For example, had we learned the exact name of one thing, we would have learned the names of all things, too, for there is no exactness without God."³⁴ According to Nicholas of Cusa, absolute knowledge (in both senses of the word *absolute*: comprehending *all* the objects of cognition and *exhausting* each of them) is gained through cognition of the integral rule of a world-producing unrolling process, this rule being nothing other than the *rolled up*.

Now we come to the last question: *why* is the rolled-up foundation of the Universe unrolling itself? As we have seen, God as the rolled-up world can be comprehended in Cusanus' philosophy only in relation to its unrolledness; the question that we deal with now concerns the very possibility of such a relation to exist.

It is obvious that there can be no external necessity, no external impulse, urging the *rolled up* to unroll itself. To answer the question posed above, Nicholas of Cusa can only say that the self-unrolling capability is immanent in the *rolled up*. This capability is indistinguishable from the *rolled up* itself (as there can be no distinction in the *rolled up*), indistinguishable from what Nicholas of Cusa calls *measure* or *Divine mind*. Thus, the unrolling capability (to put it in modern terms, the self-propelling force of evolution) is nothing but the *rolled up* itself, and as such it is present equally and fully in everything: "Examine that which the mind sees in the diversity of beings, which are nothing but what they can be, and may have nothing but what they have from the *might-in-itself*—and you will see that all these diverse beings are only different modi of the *might-in-itself*. But the nature of everything cannot be diverse; this nature is the *might-in-itself* in its diverse modi; and you can see nothing but the *might-in-itself* in all that exists, breathes, and thinks."³⁵ The *might-in-itself* cannot be comprehended by the human mind, just as the *rolled-up-in-itself* cannot be comprehended by it, for the mind, though gaining similarity to the rolled up, is able to comprehend only the unrolled. But the *rolling-up force* of the human as well as of the Divine mind is just that *might*, Nicholas of Cusa says, which means that the human mind's *might* is a manifestation of the Divine *might*.³⁶ It is this connection that guarantees the human mind's absolute prevision: "The faculty of intellectual vision is so much connected with the *might-in-itself* [that is, the Divine *might*] that the mind is able to know in advance the goal of its quest, as the pilgrim knows in advance the end of his voyage and thus can direct his steps toward the desired extreme."³⁷

IV

Coming to Ibn 'Arabī's philosophy, we discover that he understands the indefinableness of God in a way opposite to the understanding of Nicholas of Cusa. "God is to be defined by all the definitions," he says,

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“but the forms that belong to the world cannot be put in order and encompassed. . . . That is why the definition of God is beyond knowledge: it can be achieved only by comprehending the definition of every form, which is impossible; hence, the definition of God is impossible.”³⁸ Though the concept of God in Ibn ‘Arabī’s philosophy expresses seemingly the same idea of totality of existence, this idea is radically different from that of Nicholas of Cusa in an aspect which I presume to be decisive for the general outlines of his philosophy. The totality of existence is comprehended by Ibn ‘Arabī as *already present* (or, to use Nicholas of Cusa’s terminology, *already unrolled*). God in Ibn ‘Arabī’s philosophy stands not *before* but *above* any limit, for God encompasses all of them: God is the *Everything-of-the-world*.³⁹

How can such a concept of *Everything* (that does not equal the world) be philosophically interpreted?

I think that the best way to answer this question is to compare how both philosophers understand the concept of the unity of the Divine essence. It is obvious for them that God is a unity—but what kind of unity?

God’s unity in the philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa signifies that no differentiation can be contemplated in God (differentiation causing oppositions, whereas God comes *before* any opposition). But for the concept of *Everything-of-the-world* to be elaborated, there needs to be the concept of differentiation, for an undifferentiated unity cannot be interpreted as a *whole*. At the same time, the concept of a differentiated unity of Divine essence should be elaborated in Ibn ‘Arabī’s philosophy so as not to lead to conclusions about the *real* opposites existing in God, for such opposites would deprive the Divine essence of its unity. This is why Ibn ‘Arabī uses categories that express the *virtual* and *actual* differentiation of unity,⁴⁰ thus introducing two different concepts of unity. A unity differentiated virtually is still a unity, while a unity differentiated actually turns into a plurality.

Now we can arrive at the notion of an all-encompassing Divine essence as virtually differentiated unity. Its differentiation is absolute in the sense that it represents all the possible differences, and this is why God can be contemplated as *Everything*.

But the very fact of this differentiation being virtual means that it should be realized as an actual one, for otherwise the concept of virtual differentiation would be senseless. It is this actualization of the virtual differentiation that we find in the world, the latter being an actuality of Divine unity’s virtual differentiation. Thus, the concept of virtual differentiation makes philosophical sense only when it comes together with the concept of actual differentiation, which means that God is not just *Everything*, but veritably *Everything-of-the-world*.

entiation only because it is realized as actual: God is *Everything* only because God is manifested as the world. As for actual differentiation, it can exist only as a realization of virtual differentiation: the world *is* only because it is the manifestation of God. That is why the indefinable God is not the world and is not something other than the world: thus Ibn 'Arabī manages to elaborate the same mystical thesis of God-to-world relation as Cusanus did, though proceeding from an essentially different basis.

It follows from this that no thing found in the world is essentially different from God, since this mentioned thing is nothing but an actualization of the virtual differentiation of the Divine unity. Thus, the world and God are essentially one: the world is only a *reflection* of all the possibilities that are already there in God.⁴¹

The following example may further clarify the difference between the two explanations of the God-to-world relation, as the rolled up-unrolled, and as the virtuality-actuality of differentiation. Like Nicholas of Cusa, Ibn 'Arabī resorts to a geometrical illustration of his philosophical ideas and, furthermore, also applies the dot as a basic concept. Let us imagine God as the dot, he says, and let the circle around this dot encompass all existence (here, as in the following example concerning the One and the numbers, Ibn 'Arabī is clearly following the Neoplatonic tradition); then, what is left outside the circle is nonexistence. The dot is the prime source and the basis of the circle, for the circle would not appear if not for the dot. This circle of existence is completely covered by radii (of which there is an infinite multitude), and each radius emerges from the central dot and ends in a dot on the circumference. And now, what is most important: the dot on the circumference, Ibn 'Arabī says, is nothing but the dot in the center.⁴² Nicholas of Cusa, while not objecting to the image of the circle, maintains that the central dot is the rolled-up circle, and no dot on the circle itself can be equal to its center. For Ibn 'Arabī, the central dot is the virtual circle in which all the dots are equal to each other (since there are no actual differences in God), and the actual realization of these dots (that is, the drawing of a radius) adds nothing to what had already virtually been there, but only serves as its actual reflection (which is always incomplete, for no finite multitude of radii ever covers all of the circle).⁴³

The illustrative fund common to Nicholas of Cusa and Ibn 'Arabī is not exhausted by geometry. Both of them refer also to an analogy between the relation of the One, as the source of numbers, to numbers as such, and the relation of God to the world. But Nicholas of Cusa sees "in any number nothing but the manifested potency of the innumerable and infinite One, for numbers are only particular modi manifesting One's potency,"⁴⁴ while Ibn 'Arabī says that "the One establishes the number, and the number *splits* the One":⁴⁵ he regards numbers as springing up *within* the One, the latter being the virtual set of numbers, and real

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numbers realizing this virtuality and reflecting the One. Thus, Ibn 'Arabī regards a numerical sequence not as an exemplification of the all-creating potency of the One unrolling itself, but an actualization of the virtual inner plurality of the One.

One last example, concerning light and color: "Light is not color," Cusanus says, "though light is neither the other in color nor other than color."⁴⁶ He brings up this example to illustrate the relation of God to God's creation: "God regarded as the non-other is not heaven, which is the other, although God is neither the other in it nor other than it."⁴⁷ Ibn 'Arabī agrees, too, that the relation of God to creature can be likened to light penetrating a colored glass: "Light colors itself with the color of glass, though it has no color as such, and it appears to you colored."⁴⁸ Nicholas of Cusa thinks color to be "the other" (for it belongs to the domain of opposites), while light is not this "other"; for Ibn 'Arabī color is always colored light. The light of Nicholas of Cusa comes *before* the opposition of colors; the light of Ibn 'Arabī discloses *in itself* every opposition of colors: here pure light is a virtual color, and color is the actuality of the virtual differentiation of pure light.⁴⁹

It follows that Ibn 'Arabī, too, regards God not to be other than the world; that is, he regards God to be the non-other-of-the-world. But the relation of this *non-other* to the *others* of the world differs from what we have seen in Nicholas of Cusa's philosophy. Ibn 'Arabī presumes the otherness of the world to be a manifestation of the inner virtual otherness of God, and it is for the reason that the otherness of the world is nothing but the otherness of God (that is, the latter's actuality) that God is the non-other-of-the-world. As for Cusanus, he holds the world's otherness to be a manifestation of the *non-otherness* of God: this non-other (having *no* otherness in itself at all) unrolls itself as the *others*.

I think that this exposition is enough to show that Ibn 'Arabī's answer to the first question (*what* is God in relation to the world) is logically opposite to the answer given by Nicholas of Cusa. No less difference can be expected to exist between their answers to the second question, as well (*how* this relation is accomplished).

The Divine is eternal, while the worldly is temporal. As long as the relation between God and the world is the relation between the virtuality and actuality of differentiation, eternity is to be understood in Ibn 'Arabī's philosophy as the virtuality of temporal differentiation, and time as the actuality of virtual eternal differentiation; as the world is a reflection of God (which is always incomplete), so time is a reflection of eternity. How can such an eternity-to-time relation be contemplated?

Eternity is a continuity, whereas the temporal succession, Ibn 'Arabī claims, is intermittent (that is, it has an atomic structure): time is a noncontinuous reflection of eternity. If we visualize eternity as a line (which is continuous), then time will be an uninterrelated succession of

dots into each of which the line is reflected (in mathematical terms, *mapped*). Each of these reflections is isolated from the others, and though we can mentally turn this unbroken sequence of dots into a continuous line, this operation has no correspondence with ontological reality: regarded as a characteristic of existence, time is intermitted and not continuous.⁵⁰ In terms of this example, a line is a virtual continuous sequence of dots, while the continuous sequence of dots constitutes the actuality of this virtual differentiation of the line.⁵¹ We may add that, since virtuality exists only through its actualization, the line exists only because it is mapped into dots: there is no eternity without time, as there is no temporality that would not be a reflection of eternity.

Now let us translate this into ontological language.

Eternal Divine existence, Ibn 'Arabī says, is an absolute completeness differentiated by inner "correlations" (*nisba*); since differentiation in God is virtual, these correlations are nonexistent (*'adamiyya*).⁵² It is these correlations that produce the virtual otherness in God which manifests itself in the world as an actual otherness when the nonexistent correlations acquire their existence and become worldly essences. The process of embodiment of these correlations in the world is the process of projecting God into the world: in each atom of time all of the Divine essence is embodied as an atomic state of the world. It is the unbroken succession of these atomic states that gives a false impression of time "flow."

Since the otherness in God is virtual, any correlation can be embodied in the form of any other: virtual otherness can become a reality as *any* actual otherness. This means that any essence in the world can become (in the next atom of time) any other essence *if* such will be a realization of the virtual differentiation of the Divine essence. Whether this happens or not, and how precisely if it does happen, one can acquire this knowledge only by knowing the nonexistent correlations and the process of their embodiment in the world. To understand Ibn 'Arabī's point of view in this question, we must analyze his concept of humanity and its place in the world.

We have said that each reflection of a line into a dot (that is, of eternity into a temporal atom) is *full* (as Ibn 'Arabī puts it, the world "gathers into itself" God in each moment).⁵³ But it is obvious that a line can be reflected not only fully, but partially, too. So, there must be something that guarantees this fullness of reflection, and it is the human being who plays this role in Ibn 'Arabī's philosophy.

According to Ibn 'Arabī, humans are the only beings that embody all of the Divine essence's inner correlations: they reflect God with the same fullness as the world does.⁵⁴ Only because this "fully gathering" reflection of God is present in every atom of time, God is projected into the world fully. That is why humans are eternal: if not for them, the line

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would not have been reflected into a dot, and the virtual differentiation of God would not become an actual differentiation of the world; thus, the human being is the guarantee of eternity and time, the guarantee of their coexistence.⁵⁵

It is these ontological features of human beings that set the outlines of their cognitive potential. The human being (regarded as a being belonging to the world) is an actuality of all the virtual differentiations of God (that is, the embodiment of all nonexistent correlations), which means that human beings can discover God and the world *in themselves*. But to do so, they must move from time into eternity, for *discovering God in themselves* means turning all of the actual differentiation of humanity into virtual.⁵⁶ And here the crucial question arises: are humans able to do that?

For there to be a positive answer at all, at least one presumption is needed. Humans must be able to carry out actions, taking place in time, that would give (or at least are supposed to give) the desired results. Now, the notion of action is related to that of cause, for we say that an action has taken place only if some effect was caused. Thus we can speak of actions taking place in time only if relations of causality exist between one atomic temporal state of the world and another.

And it is exactly that that Ibn 'Arabī denies: "only non-being, and not being, has effect,"⁵⁷ he says, meaning by non-being those nonexistent correlations that virtually differentiate God. He is right, of course, as long as his philosophy is concerned: to have effect means to change, and for change to take place, *duration* is needed; but there is no duration *inside* any temporal atom, each of which brings about a fixed and unchangeable-in-itself state of the world. Changes take place only when a *new* state of the world emerges in the next atom of time (this state being as fixed as the preceding one), and this new state of the world emerges as a new realization of the virtual differentiation of God. For that reason the category of action is inapplicable to temporal existence: it describes only the relation between virtual and actual differentiation, between eternity and time.

Thus we find out that the eternal cause brings about its temporal effect. Now let us have a closer look at this formula. The cause being a nonexistent correlation, its effect is *that very cause*, having acquired temporal existence: the cause is essentially equal to its effect and *does not produce any change*. In Ibn 'Arabī's philosophy, the categories *cause* and *action* are quite different from what we are accustomed to in Western philosophy.⁵⁸

Thus, human beings *may not* carry out any action to cause the desired result and turn their actual differentiation into virtual (for the mere reason that a temporal action is impossible). It follows that humans are ontologically capable of discovering the ultimate truth, but it does not

depend on them whether this ability is realized. This absolute knowledge may only be *granted* to them as a Divine *gift*, as a revelation:⁵⁹ in this mystical revelation humans will witness that virtual differentiation of God that governs the world, but they are not in a position to cause this revelation.⁶⁰

V

Philosophical inquiry is an endless voyage toward a yet unachieved goal, and the ways chosen by various philosophical traditions can differ fundamentally. But on these paths there are points which I hold to be decisive for the further development of philosophical ideas, for it is at these points that fundamentally new directions may (or may not) be found. The philosophies of Nicholas of Cusa and Ibn 'Arabī are, in my view, such decisive points in the history of European and Arabic philosophy. To demonstrate this thesis, in the last part of this essay I shall analyze the perspectives opened up by these two philosophers.

Both Nicholas of Cusa and Ibn 'Arabī proceed from the mystical notion of God as indefinable and of the world as non-other-than-God. For Nicholas, it means that God is *Nothing-of-the-world*, and for Ibn 'Arabī, that God is *Everything-of-the-world*. It is from this principal deviation that the other distinctions result.

In the first case, we have to take only one step from Cusanus' concept of *measure* to arrive at the notion of one universal law ruling the evolution (the *unrolling*) of the world from the prime principle. This prime principle is absolutely simple and indefinable; moreover, it is the universal law itself. Every state of the world and every worldly essence is exclusively and entirely defined by that *law-principle*. The prime principle is present in every essence of the world, since the latter embodies the law that defined its evolution: to know the essence means to know this law, and to know this law means to know all the essences of the world.

The prime foundation of the world is unrolling itself out of its own force and producing the world, and since the rolled up is the *non-other* of the unrolled, we may conclude that the force and law of the world's evolution are not other than the world itself: the concept of the world's lawful evolution solely defined by its prime *principle-law* from which all the other laws are derived (*developed*, or *unrolled*), is presupposed by Nicholas of Cusa's philosophy.

Since the law of the world's evolution is an integral unity, causality is also integral: every being, the "exactness" (as Cusanus says) of which is this integral law itself, is tied by cause-and-effect relations to all the other essences and depends on them.

Finally, this integral law of the world's evolution is within the capacity of humanity's cognition. To achieve an exhaustive and exact knowledge of everything, human beings only need to discover it in their minds, and

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what they discover is exactly the same as that which rules the world. (I think that the resemblance of these arguments to what Descartes says later is quite evident.) The process by which this discovery takes place is irrational in Nicholas of Cusa's philosophy, just as it is in the European sciences of modern times.

In the second case, the world is a sequence of fixed states that are not interrelated and interdependent. Each of the world's states reflects the eternal and unchangeable Fullness of existence, and to acquire the knowledge of the laws of this reflecting process, a knowledge of reflection is not sufficient. As time has atomic structure, no state of the world enjoys duration. Cause and effect are the same essence: when projecting itself (from eternity into time), it is called cause, and being a (temporal) projection, it is called effect. Since these projections are never repeated, the cause-to-effect relations are in constant change, never staying the same as they were in the previous moment. It follows that the cause does not act in time: nothing is an effect of the cause to be found in the past.

To know the reflection, one must know the reflected. The Divine fullness of existence reflected as the world is within the cognitive potential of human beings: it can be disclosed to them in themselves, as long as they are full reflections of God. But such disclosure, such revelation, means that humans *cease* to be reflections and turn into the Reflected: in Ibn 'Arabī's philosophy, humans cannot achieve a knowledge of the world as long as they belong to it. To express this in terms of Western philosophy, true cognition is impossible for the subject: to acquire it, humanity has to become a *universal subject* enclosing all of the world.

Nicholas of Cusa's philosophical interpretation of the mystical outlook made it logically possible to understand humanity as a subject, and the world as an object, of cognition. With him human beings ceased to be a microcosm and could now be opposed to the world: an object and a subject could become independent of each other.

Ibn 'Arabī, on the contrary, made the medieval concept of humanity become absolute: the human being in his philosophy turned into a universal subject embracing all of the Universe. This universal subject is able to discover the ultimate truth of the world, but this truth is quite different from that declared by recent Western philosophy.

NOTES

- 1 – Suffice it to mention Boethius' *Commentary on Porphyry*, where he amply resorts to description while speaking about the highest genera that cannot be defined by their nature.

- 2 – This close linkage of ontological unlimitedness to epistemological indefiniteness is due, I think, to the mystical concept that equalizes word and existence: a true knowledge and an ontological essence described by it must be uniform and identical.
- 3 – Perhaps one of the most striking in this case is the example of Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, a prominent Ismaʿīlī philosopher. He, too, claimed that no definite assertion about God is possible, and no proposition having God as its subject can be true, not even that “God exists” (see his *Rāḥat al-ʿAql*, chapter 2, especially paragraphs 6 and 7 of this chapter). But this served al-Kirmānī only to clear the ground for constructing an exhaustive system of rational knowledge about the Universe. Generally speaking, the indefinableness of the highest categories is, for an Aristotelian, not an obstacle but a necessary condition to gain definitions for the rest of the categories.
- 4 – Though Divine Nothing (in the first case) and Divine Everything (in the second case) are not *something* (this *something* being the world), they ought to turn out being *not other* than this *something*. The mechanism of such a transition might be called *explication* and *reflection*, respectively. In the following pages I try to describe the way Cusanus and Ibn ʿArabī understood it, but here the contrast could be illustrated by a metaphor. Passing through a prism, the colorless light (*Nothing* color) turns into a color spectrum, the latter making explicit developing (or unfolding) the prime colorlessness of *Nothing*. The full spectrum of colors (*Everything* color) with its continuous transition from one to another through an infinite diversity of shades (so that you cannot fix a boundary between two colors, and in this sense no color as such exists, but only transitional shades) may be depicted (reflected) as *something* colored with a few paints on a piece of paper, this reflection being but an imperfect and incomplete copy, and not a development and explication.
- 5 – For this and other examples of the rolled up-unrolled relation, see Nicholas of Cusa, *The Learned Ignorance (De Docta Ignorantia)*.
- 6 – I introduce these terms, *Nothing-of-the-world* and *Everything-of-the-world*, which neither Nicholas of Cusa nor Ibn ʿArabī uses, to facilitate the exposition of their philosophical doctrines. It also helps me to emphasize the fact that the conceptualization of the mystical outlook by the two philosophers is logically opposite and complementary at the same time.
- 7 – Nicholas of Cusa, *The Vision of God (De Visione Dei)*, 30–39.
- 8 – *Ibid.*, 51.
- 9 – *Ibid.*, 52.

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- 10 – Ibid.
- 11 – Ibid., 54.
- 12 – Ibid., 55.
- 13 – Ibid., 54.
- 14 – Ibid., 57.
- 15 – “You teach me, oh Lord, that otherness, which is not present in You, does not and cannot exist by itself, too, and that no otherness, since it is not present in You, can make one creation other than another though one creation is not another: heaven is not the earth, for heaven is truly heaven and the earth is truly earth. Looking for the otherness which is neither in You nor outside You, where shall I find it? And if it does not exist, then why is the earth a creation other than heaven? It is impossible to comprehend it without otherness!” (ibid., 58).
- 16 – This compact category rolls up (as Cusanus would have said himself) the mystical formula “the world is not God, but it is not anything other than God.”
- 17 – Nicholas of Cusa, *The Non-other (De non aliud)*, 12.
- 18 – Ibid., 13–14.
- 19 – Ibid., 14.
- 20 – Ibid., 8.
- 21 – Ibid., 21; see also 18.
- 22 – The importance of this thesis which I emphasize here will disclose itself in comparison with the philosophical ideas of Ibn ‘Arabi.
- 23 – Nicholas of Cusa, *The Vision of God*, 56. These arguments could sound perhaps somewhat perplexing as formulated here for the general case of the *infinite rolled-up*. I believe they cease to be ambiguous (to a certain extent at least) when applied to a concrete case of a rolled up-unrolled relation—for example, that of a line and an angle. A line is an infinite equality of all angles because any angle, when it is rolled up, is equal to any other, even if they are unequal when unrolled. The equality of angles rolled up in a line is not a concrete equality for the reason that any concrete equality of two (unrolled) angles presupposes any number of other, unequal angles, while the rolled up rules out any inequality. The line is a common basis for all possible angles (for it is out of the line that they are unrolled), and in this sense it constitutes their measure.

Philosophy East & West 24 – Nicholas of Cusa, *The Non-other*, 16.

- 25 – Nicholas of Cusa, *The Idiot (Idiota)*, III (*De Mente*), 57.
- 26 – Ibid.
- 27 – Nicholas of Cusa, *The Non-other*, 17.
- 28 – Nicholas of Cusa, *The Idiot* III, 64–65.
- 29 – Ibid., 65.
- 30 – Ibid., 75.
- 31 – Ibid., 72.
- 32 – Ibid., 85 (my italics).
- 33 – It seems to me quite obvious that the procedure for making one’s mind similar to the prime truth of things is irrational, for it not only stands above but *precedes* any possibility of true cognition. This procedure is exactly the process of mystical revelation of truth.
- 34 – Nicholas of Cusa, *The Idiot* III, 69.
- 35 – Nicholas of Cusa, *The Apex of Contemplation (De Apice theoriae)*, 9.
- 36 – Ibid., 9–11.
- 37 – Ibid., 11.
- 38 – Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, 2d ed. (Beirut, 1980), p. 68.
- 39 – Ibn ‘Arabī goes a rather complex way to arrive at the notion of God representing the absolute fullness of existence, and it is impossible here to describe this way in all of its details. Suffice it to say that Ibn ‘Arabī, too, analyzes the possibility of understanding God as Nothing-of-the-world, but his position stands poles apart from that of Cusanus. If the Divine essence bears no likeness to what we see in the world, Ibn ‘Arabī says, then no relation could ever exist between God and the world. Moreover, to say that God is dissimilar to the world (and this is exactly what Nicholas of Cusa does, saying that God is on the other side of the coincidence of opposites) means, in Ibn ‘Arabī’s view, setting a limit to God, i.e., defining God—and this, of course, contradicts the thesis of God’s indefinableness. Thus, Ibn ‘Arabī concludes, God in relation to the world can be understood only as Everything-of-the-world, and not as Nothing-of-the-world. The latter category, in his point of view, makes no sense: God is either *Nothing* (i.e., *nothing* can be said about God), having no relation to the world, or, having such relation, God is *Everything*.
- 40 – To express the concept of virtual differentiation, Ibn ‘Arabī uses the term *tamayyuz* (distinction), and for the actual, *gāyriyya* (otherness), *tafāḍul* (superiority of one over another). These two concepts could be expressed another way: “differentiation *without* actual differences” and “differentiation *through* actual differences,” respectively. Andrey V. Smirnov

- 41 – This is an important point of contrast between Cusanus' and Ibn 'Arabī's philosophies. Both of them regard the world to be inalienable and essentially one with God. But in the first case, the concept of world as unrolledness has a richer content than the concept of the rolled up, for unrolledness exemplifies all that was not manifested in the rolled up. In the case of Ibn 'Arabī, things stay opposite: the concept of the world as an actual differentiation has poorer content than the concept of virtual differentiation, for the absolute Divine fullness is never reflected in the world completely.
- 42 – Which means that the beginning and the end of everything is in God.
- 43 – See Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (Cairo, 1856), vol. 3, p. 275.
- 44 – Nicholas of Cusa, *The Apex of Contemplation*, 14.
- 45 – Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, p. 77 (my italics).
- 46 – Nicholas of Cusa, *The Non-other*, 20–21.
- 47 – *Ibid.*, 20.
- 48 – Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, p. 103.
- 49 – On these grounds, Ibn 'Arabī says, you may consider light both as colorless and colored: the first and the latter is equally true (*ibid.*, p. 104).
- 50 – Let us compare this with the eternity-to-time relation in Nicholas of Cusa's philosophy. His eternity-dot unrolls itself into time-line, and, consequently, time is continuous: we may mentally divide it into intermittent dots, but such a division can be done only mentally, while ontologically the continuity is true.
- 51 – Thus, Ibn 'Arabī's conclusion about the atomic nature of time is logically necessary: had the sequence of dots been continuous, it would have become indistinguishable from line, and God in every respect would become equal to the world; this conclusion (as we shall see later) is rather important for Ibn 'Arabī's theory of causality. As for Nicholas of Cusa, he regards God (i.e., the *rolled up*) to come *before* the opposition of continuous and intermittent and thus can describe the world as continuous.
- 52 – See Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, pp. 53, 65, 76, etc. The nonexistent correlations may be likened to the coordinates of unlimited surface: having no actual existence, the coordinates provide the possibility to differentiate the surface.
- 53 – Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, p. 49; *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, vol. 4, p. 318.

Philosophy East & West 54 – Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, pp. 48, 50.

- 55 – If we imagine, Ibn ‘Arabī says, that humans are “taken out of the world’s treasury,” then the world itself would disappear at once, and the Divine essence would turn from absolute Fullness into absolute Nothing, having no relation to the world (Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, p. 50). Only humans as all-gathering creatures guarantee the actualization of God’s virtual differentiation, for it is only through them that the virtual differentiation is *fully* reflected in the actual world (though *fully* does not mean *completely*: in full reflection, every nonexistent correlation is reflected in one way or another, and such reflection is still full even if it does not exhaust all the ways of reflecting each of the nonexistent correlations, which is the condition for complete reflection).
- 56 – At this point, Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding of the process of cognition fundamentally differs from that of Cusanus. For the latter, true knowledge is acquired by the *mind* becoming similar to the truth: humanity does not need to change its nature altogether, does not need to roll itself up in order to know the truth. As for the first, true knowledge is unattainable in the world, for it is acquired by making the human being *completely* similar to the object of cognition, and to achieve this similarity, it must reach the domain of not actual but virtual differentiation.
- 57 – Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, p. 177. He goes on to explain to those who give examples of temporal cause-to-effect relations: “as for being having its effect, this is accomplished only through non-being” (ibid.). Effects, in Ibn ‘Arabī’s view, only *appear* to be the temporal effects of temporal causes, while in fact they are brought forth by eternal nonexistent correlations.
- 58 – These arguments constitute Ibn ‘Arabī’s theory of *new creation*. See *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, pp. 51–53, 65, 67, 76, 153, 177, etc.
- 59 – Like all the other changes of temporal existence, the change of human knowledge is dependent on how the virtual differentiation of eternity is actualized. This actual differentiation could at some moment be such that the Divine unity and its virtual differentiation are revealed to humanity, but it in no way depends on humanity whether it happens or not (see Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, pp. 59–61). This revelation that comes not by man’s will may be called *the Divine gift*.
- 60 – This is another point in which Ibn ‘Arabī differs from Cusanus, who had no doubt in the human mind’s *might*. The man-in-the-world, Nicholas of Cusa says, is able to see clearly the goal of his cognition and pursue it; Ibn ‘Arabī can attribute such ability only to the *eternal* human being, the human being as virtual differentiation of God.

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