



STEPHEN GERSH

Rewriting the *Proslogion*

Nicholas of Cusa's Transformation of Anselm of Canterbury's Proof of the Existence of God

EPEKEINA, vol. 1, nn. 1-2 (2012), pp. 65-89  
*Mediaeval Ontology*

ISSN: 2281-3209

DOI: 10.7408/epkn.v1i1-2.8

Published on-line by:

CRF – CENTRO INTERNAZIONALE PER LA RICERCA FILOSOFICA  
PALERMO (ITALY)

[www.ricercafilosofica.it/epekeina](http://www.ricercafilosofica.it/epekeina)



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons  
Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

## Rewriting the *Proslogion*

### Nicholas of Cusa's Transformation of Anselm of Canterbury's Proof of the Existence of God

Stephen Gersh

The questions concerning the nature and extent of Nicholas of Cusa's debts to Anselm of Canterbury's thought have been considered most recently in an article entitled «Nicholas of Cusa's Intellectual Relationship to Anselm of Canterbury» by Jasper Hopkins.<sup>1</sup> According to this distinguished modern interpreter, Nicholas reveals considerable indebtedness to Anselm in at least five areas: the description of God, the use of a priori reasoning, the assumption of eternal truth, the theory of atonement, and the relation between faith and reason. Nevertheless, although Hopkins rightly decides to emphasize Nicholas' affinities with the medieval world as well as his anticipations of the modern era, it becomes clear that the fifteenth-century writer's indebtedness towards his predecessor is combined with considerable independence. It is this complex relation of semi-dependence – which one might call a 'creative re-writing' – that I wish to consider in the present essay. Without dissenting from the conclusions of Hopkins' essay, my intention is to venture into a deeper consideration of the first (and to some degree also of the second and third) area of Nicholas' indebtedness to Anselm. The focus of this analysis will be the fifteenth-century thinker's individual and innovative treatment of what is nowadays called the 'ontological argument' but was formerly known as the *ratio Anselmi*.

This argument is, of course, stated in the *Proslogion*. In his preface, Anselm characterizes the one argument of the *Proslogion* as somehow complementing or completing the many arguments of the *Monologion* in that this argument is sufficient *a* to prove itself and *b* to prove that God truly exists, that he is the supreme good which does not depend on anything else but on which everything else depends in order to be and to be well, and that he is whatever else we believe concerning the divine substance.<sup>2</sup> The argument obviously begins the main discussion of the *Proslogion* although it is difficult to determine how far it extends within the treatise. That Anselm clearly intends this argument to be a self-evident axiom of human reason reflecting the self-sufficient nature of the divine substance would suggest that the argument represents only the content of chapters two to four. But that he also envisages his argument as proving not only the existence but also the nature of the divine substance would require us to understand the

---

<sup>1</sup>HOPKINS 2006.

<sup>2</sup>Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion* pr., ed. SCHMITT 1946 (I, 93. 1-10).

argument as extending throughout the treatise.<sup>3</sup> Fortunately, our purpose here is not to establish Anselm's intentions regarding the argument but rather to consider Nicholas of Cusa's reaction to it.

Four aspects of the *ratio Anselmi* seem particularly relevant here. First, there is the absence of a specified relation between the two definitions of God. Thus, God is 'something than which a greater cannot be thought' (*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*) but also 'something greater than can be thought' (*quiddam maius quam cogitari possit*).<sup>4</sup> The relation between the two definitions might perhaps be specified by associating the first with the fact that God exists and the second with the manner of God's existence. Secondly, we find an emphasis upon the process of demonstration. The complementary relation between the arguments of the *Monologion* and the argument of the *Proslogion* underlines this aspect. According to the methodology explicitly stated in the earlier treatise, whatever conclusions were to be drawn from the various inquiries had to be based not on scriptural authority but on the 'necessity' (*necessitas*) of reason.<sup>5</sup> With emphasis placed on the necessity, it is here the contrast with *authority* that perhaps most delineates the field of inquiry. Clearly it corresponds to an emphasis upon the process of demonstration. Third, there is the absence of distinction between the kinds of maxima implied in the two definitions of God. In principle, a distinction between the idea that God is the greatest thing that does exist – where the maximum is actual -- and the idea that God is the greatest thing that could exist – where the maximum is potential – might be invoked at this point. Finally, we find a contextualization in dialectic. The complementary relation between the arguments of the *Monologion* and the argument of the *Proslogion* also underlines this aspect. According to the methodology explicitly stated in the earlier treatise, whatever conclusions were to be drawn from the various inquiries had to be based not on scriptural authority but on the necessity 'of reason' (*rationis*). With emphasis placed on the reason, it is now the contrast with *scripture* that perhaps most delineates the field of inquiry. Clearly it corresponds to a contextualization in dialectic.

Nicholas of Cusa refers to this cluster of ideas many times in the course of his literary career. Chronologically speaking, a list of the most explicit citations<sup>6</sup> would extend from his first major philosophical work *De Docta Ignorantia* (1440), through *De Quaerendo Deo* (1445), *Apologia Doctae Igno-*

<sup>3</sup>For a general discussion of this question see GERSH 1988, 255-78.

<sup>4</sup>*Proslogion* 2 (I, 101. 4-5); 15 (I, 112. 14-15).

<sup>5</sup>Anselm of Canterbury, *Monologion*, ed. SCHMITT 1946 (I, 7. 9-11).

<sup>6</sup>All citations of Nicholas' works will be from the Heidelberg Academy edition: *Nicolai de Cusa Opera omnia iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis*, Hamburg, Meiner 1932-. Individual works are cited by the traditional book and chapter numbers, with volume, section (or page), and line numbers of the Heidelberg edition given in parentheses.

*rantiae* (1449), *Idiota*, *De Sapientia* (1450), *De Visione Dei* (1453), *De Beryllo* (1458), *De Principio* (1459), *De Non Aliud* (1461), and *De Venatione Sapientiae* (1462), to his final essay in the field of philosophy *De Apice Theoriae* (1464).<sup>7</sup> Although Nicholas in every case makes a brief allusion to rather than a detailed analysis of Anselm's argument,<sup>8</sup> his developments of its conceptual and methodological implications are far-reaching. For example, when Nicholas asserts that one can conceive a God who is greater than can be conceived,<sup>9</sup> he specifies the two definitions as the affirmative and negative aspects of a single relation. Moreover, his argument that any questioning about God's existence presupposes that existence<sup>10</sup> reduces the emphasis upon the process of demonstration. Again, when Nicholas explains that the God than which a greater cannot be conceived and the God who is greater than can be conceived are both maximal,<sup>11</sup> he specifies the two definitions as a distinction between kinds of maxima. Finally, his analogy between the beryl stone and the maximum based on the trajectory of vision<sup>12</sup> replaces the contextualization in dialectic with a contextualization in geometry.

In order to understand the nature of such doctrinal modifications of the *ratio Anselmi* a little better, we must examine the metaphysical context in which they occurred first in a general way and second with respect to each of the four aspects distinguished. As usual for a thinker in the Neoplatonic tradition, it is possible to consider Nicholas' doctrine either from its more objective and ontological or from its more subjective and epistemological viewpoint.<sup>13</sup> His specification of the two definitions of God as the negative and affirmative aspects of a single relation and as a distinction between kinds of maxima can be understood with respect to the former viewpoint, and his reduction of emphasis upon the process of demonstration and his replacement of the contextualization in dialectic by a contextualization in geometry with respect to the latter.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>7</sup>For these citations see *De Quaerendo Deo* (h IV, 5. 7-8), *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* (h II, 8. 15-16), *De Principio* (h X/2b, 26. 16), *De Apice Theoriae* (h XII, 11. 2-4) – the other passages will be discussed in detail below.

<sup>8</sup>Anselm's actual name is attached to the argument at *De Venatione Sapientiae* 26 (h XII, 77. 5-6). Elsewhere we find anonymous allusions to what was, obviously, an argument well known to most of Nicholas' readers.

<sup>9</sup>*Idiota de Sapientia* II (h V<sup>2</sup>, 28. 12-13), *De Visione Dei* 1 (h VI 5, 4-6).

<sup>10</sup>*IDS* II (h V<sup>2</sup>, 29. 18-30. 12).

<sup>11</sup>*De Beryllo* (h XI/1, 8. 5-6), *DVS* 26 (h XII, 77. 2-6).

<sup>12</sup>*DB* (h XI/1, 8. 5-9).

<sup>13</sup>For an example of such an analysis of the Neoplatonic tradition before Nicholas of Cusa see GERSH 1978. The distinction is a useful one provided that one does not unconsciously lapse into a post-Kantian sense of 'subjective.' This tendency somewhat weakened the otherwise useful analyses of Nicholas' thought by the German scholars who revived this study in the early twentieth century and were mostly Neo-Kantians by training.

<sup>14</sup>Two articles, DANGELMAYR 1972 and DANGELMAYR 1975, are useful in connection with the present topic. In particular, the themes of the role of the *coincidentia oppositorum* and of the reduced

## 1 Nicholas' Objective Theory

The main lines of this theory, which did not change substantially during the course of Nicholas' career, are set out in *De Docta Ignorantia*.<sup>15</sup> Here, we may perhaps distinguish three philosophical ideas which the fifteenth-century writer shares with his predecessors in the Neoplatonic tradition: the oppositional structure with a privileged term, the continuum, and the combination of the continuum with a disjunction; and three ideas representing innovations on the later writer's part: the new privileged terms, the continuum as coincidence of opposites or as fourfold structure, and the widening of the disjunction. These two sets of ideas will be distinguished in order to simplify our exposition of Nicholas' thought. In practice, the writer himself often interprets the first set in terms of the second and vice versa.

### 1.1 The oppositional structure with a privileged term

For Nicholas of Cusa and his Neoplatonic sources, reality in the objective<sup>16</sup> sense consists of a series of oppositions each containing a superior (+) and an inferior (-) term, the most important of these oppositions being unity (+) and multiplicity (-), sameness (+) and otherness (-), rest (+) and motion (-), and eternity (+) and time (-). This structure emerges clearly in *De Docta Ignorantia* II where Nicholas explains his general theory of the relation between God and the creature in the greatest detail.<sup>17</sup> He also applies this structure to the relation between the God who is the unity of geometrical figures and the multiplicity of such figures,<sup>18</sup> to the relation between the one exemplar and the multiple exemplars of the Platonists,<sup>19</sup> and to the

---

emphasis upon demonstration in Nicholas' reading of Anselm to be developed below were noted by Dangelmayr.

<sup>15</sup>The present author remains unconvinced by certain modern interpretations which stress the developmental side of Nicholas' thought. The undeniable tensions there between different philosophical positions are mostly to be explained in terms of the dynamic, flexible, and 'conjectural' aspects of his thinking. New formulations appear at different points in Nicholas' career, for example the *possest* and the *non aliud* of the later treatises. However, these are mostly explicable as interpretations of his own earlier positions, the process of self-interpretation climaxing in the treatise *De Venatione Sapientiae* of 1462 where everything passes in review. Useful 'developmental' accounts in English are: WATTS 1982, and the collected essays of CRANZ 2000.

<sup>16</sup>The same applies to reality in the subjective sense. As we shall see, reality in the objective sense and reality in the subjective sense cannot be totally separated from one another.

<sup>17</sup>*De Docta Ignorantia* II. 1-3 (h I, 61. 1-72. 22) – on oppositional structure containing superior and inferior term as a logical principle see especially Nicholas' remarks at *DDI* II. 1 (h I 61. 1-64. 13). In practice, Nicholas often combines the superior term of one opposition with the inferior term of another, for example unity (+) and otherness (-) in *De Coniecturis* I. 9 (h III, 37. 1-43. 5). Oppositional structure in Nicholas work is discussed in BEIERWALTES 1977.

<sup>18</sup>*DDI* I. 10 (h I, 19. 15-21. 25).

<sup>19</sup>*DDI* I. 17 (h I, 33. 13-20).

relation between the one being and the multiple substances and accidents of the Aristotelians.<sup>20</sup>

## 1.2 The Continuum

That the mutually opposed terms represent poles of a continuum is indicated by Nicholas' description of the universe as proceeding from God 'through a simple emanation' (*per simplicem emanationem*). The writer clearly underlines the *simplicity* of the process – by stating that all the parts of the universe come into being simultaneously with the whole, contrary to the doctrine of Avicenna and other philosophers that intelligence precedes higher soul and higher soul precedes nature – and also clearly stresses the *emanative* character of the process.<sup>21</sup> When the simplicity of the process is further specified by saying that on one side of the continuum, God's unity is a unity 'to which no multiplicity is opposed' (*cui non opponitur [...] multitudo*),<sup>22</sup> and that on the other side of the continuum, the creature's unity 'falls without proportion' (*cadat absque proportione*) from the unity of God,<sup>23</sup> we can further conclude that the continuum can be viewed exclusively from the side of one of its poles, and that the contradictory terms can also be viewed as overlapping or coextensive.<sup>24</sup>

## 1.3 The Combination of the Continuum with a Disjunction

In the objective or ontological sphere, the continuum always implies a disjunction and vice versa. According to Nicholas, it is not the case that God's unity and sameness are the cause of multiplicity and difference in the creature, but rather the creature's own failure to achieve the unity and sameness in God – a situation implying a disjunction in the causal connection.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, it is the case that God's unity and sameness are the cause of the multiplicity and difference in the creature, rather than simply the creature's failure to achieve the unity and sameness in God – a situation implying a continuity in the causal connection.<sup>26</sup> This entire argument is also applied to God's rest and eternity with respect to the creature's motion and time.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *DDI* I. 18 (h I, 36. 5-12).

<sup>21</sup> By 'emanative' one means 'dynamically unfolding.' Nicholas most frequently uses the pair of terms: 'enfolding' (*complicatio*) and 'unfolding' (*explicatio*) to express this idea.

<sup>22</sup> *DDI* I. 24 (h I, 49. 3-13). Cf. *DDI* I. 2 (h I, 7. 8-9); I. 4 (h I, 10. 26-7); I. 16 (h I, 30. 19-22); II. 2-3 (h I, 65. 11-72. 22).

<sup>23</sup> *DDI* II. 4 (h I, 73. 23-6).

<sup>24</sup> It is because of these implications that God's being is identified with his creating (*DDI* II 2 (h I, 66. 24-5)) and God's possibility with his actuality (*DDI* I. 16 (h I, 30. 8-18)).

<sup>25</sup> *DDI* II. 2 (h I, 65. 11-66. 6), II. 3 (h I, 71.1-10).

<sup>26</sup> *DDI* II 3 (h I, 71. 1-10).

<sup>27</sup> *DDI* II. 2 (h I, 66. 24-67. 6).

## 2 The New Privileged Terms

Beginning in his earliest works,<sup>28</sup> Nicholas introduces at least two oppositions containing a superior (+) and an inferior (-) term which had either not been utilized or at least had not been extensively utilized by earlier Neoplatonists. These are 'absolute' (*absolutum*) (+) and 'contracted' (*contractum*) (-) and 'infinite' (*infinitum*) (+) and 'finite' (*finitum*) (-). Given that in both these cases there is said to be a superior term (+) which precludes opposition and an inferior term (-) which allows it, Nicholas is here presenting two oppositions which have the peculiarity of challenging the nature of opposition itself.<sup>29</sup> That 'absolute' means something which is not related to, determined from, or limited by another term is indicated by the apparent derivation of the concept from twelfth-century Platonism.<sup>30</sup> One of the principal aims of *De Docta Ignorantia* is to replace a fourfold cosmological scheme of secular origin consisting of absolute necessity, necessity of involvement, determinate possibility, and absolute possibility with a more implicitly Christian threefold cosmological structure consisting of absolute maximum, contracted maximum, and simultaneously absolute and contracted maximum.<sup>31</sup> A close inspection of terminology in these two schemes reveals that the notion of absolute is set in opposition to the notions of involvement and determinacy. Regarding 'infinite' there are probably two things to note. First, the term 'infinite' is employed as a synonym for absolute.<sup>32</sup> However, there is a complication in that we also encounter in Nicholas' texts: the term 'infinite' applied to both absolute and contracted,<sup>33</sup> and the term 'contracted' applied to both infinite and finite.<sup>34</sup> Secondly, the term 'infinite' is employed as a synonym for negative.<sup>35</sup> Obviously this sense of negative – which is opposed to affirmative by Nicholas in the context of divine naming – is not a privative one.

<sup>28</sup>Nicholas introduces a number of new terms in his later writings: for example, 'actual-possible' (*possest*) and 'non-other' (*non aliud*). The interpretation of these terms presents special problems which we will not discuss here.

<sup>29</sup>See the passages listed in n. 22.

<sup>30</sup>We may consider 'contracted' to be defined in opposition to 'absolute'.

<sup>31</sup>For the Platonists' fourfold see *DDI* II. 7-10 (h I, 81. 16-99. 12); for Nicholas' threefold (which underlies the entire structure of *De Docta Ignorantia*) see *DDI* I. 2 (h I, 7. 1-8. 17); II. 4 (h I, 72. 23-73. 7), the use of terminology in *DDI* I. 6 (h I, 13. 12-14. 21) and II. 2 (h I, 66. 7-11) suggesting a linkage between the two schemes. The Platonists' scheme is derived from Thierry of Chartres who in turn had derived it from Boethius.

<sup>32</sup>*DDI* I. 5 (h I, 11. 23-12. 21).

<sup>33</sup>At *DDI* II. 1 (h I, 64. 14-65. 10) Nicholas describes the former as 'negatively' (*negative*) and the latter as 'privatively' (*privative*) infinite. Cf. II. 4 (h I, 73. 22-74. 4).

<sup>34</sup>At *DDI* II. 1 (h I, 64. 14-65. 10). Nicholas explains that the contracted term's privative infinity is infinite and finite in different respects.

<sup>35</sup>*DDI* I. 26 (h I, 55. 25-56. 1).

## 2.1 The Continuum as Coincidence of Opposites or as Fourfold Structure

Nicholas' development of the idea that the mutually opposed terms represent poles of a continuum represents one of his greatest innovations. It is based on interpreting the relation between God and the creature in terms of *a* a coincidence of opposites – in which the notion of continuum excludes any disjunction – and *b* a fourfold structure – in which the notions of continuum and disjunction are balanced. In *De Docta Ignorantia*, the notion of a coincidence of opposites ( $A/\text{non-}B = B/\text{non-}A$ ) is applied to various sets of terms defining God with respect to what we might term his transcendence and immanence.<sup>36</sup> Because the continuum as coincidence of opposites involves neither opposed nor mediating terms, it contrasts with the continuum as fourfold structure which involves both opposed and mediating terms.<sup>37</sup> In *De Docta Ignorantia*, the notion of a fourfold structure ( $A/\text{non-}B$ ,  $A/B$ ,  $\text{non-}A/B$ ,  $\text{non-}A/\text{non-}B$ ) is applied to various conjectures about God's relation to the creature: for example, the notion that God's truth is that either something is, or both is and is not, or is not, or neither is nor is not.<sup>38</sup> The relation between the notions of coincidence of opposites and of fourfold structure is an extremely subtle one, and Nicholas emphasizes that the former is not to be completely separated from the latter but somehow discovered by a more elevated mode of thinking within it.<sup>39</sup>

## 2.2 The Widening of the Disjunction

As we have seen, Nicholas' insistence that the cause of multiplicity and difference in the creature is the creature's failure to achieve the unity and sameness in God although God's unity and sameness is in a sense also the cause of multiplicity and difference in the creature, introduces a disjunction into the continuum of causal connection. This disjunction is widened by his further argument that the sphere of the creature is dominated by proportion – which represents a specific mathematical form of multiplicity and difference – whereas there is no proportion between

<sup>36</sup>DDI. 2 (h I, 7. 1-8. 17); I. 4 (h I, 10. 1-11. 22); I. 16-17 (h I, 30. 5-35. 12); I. 21 (h I, 42. 5-44. 9), etc. As we shall see, the most important term signifying transcendence is 'maximum' while the most important term signifying immanence is 'minimum'.

<sup>37</sup>See especially the discussion of the relation between absolute and contracted terms at DDI. 4 (h I, 73. 8-74. 24).

<sup>38</sup>This illustration is taken from DDI. I. 6 (h I, 13. 12-14. 21). In a passage following on closely from that cited in the previous note, Nicholas gives as examples of fourfold the numbers 1, 10, 100, 1000, four types of universal, etc. (DDI. 6 (h I, 79. 1-81. 15)).

<sup>39</sup>DDI. II. 5 (h I, 76. 1-78. 29). Exploration of various combinations of the notions of coincidence of opposites and of fourfold structure is a major preoccupation of *De Coniecturis*. See for example the important discussion in DC I. 11(h III, 58. 1-59. 28).



the creature and God.<sup>40</sup> Given that the relation between God and the creature is the paradigmatic instance of the relation between object and subject, analysis of the epistemological consequences of this widening of the disjunction becomes a major preoccupation of *De Docta Ignorantia*.

### 3 The Relation between the two Definitions of God

The objective or ontological theory derived from Neoplatonism and especially the innovations introduced into that theory by Nicholas himself provide the framework within which the two definitions of God furnished by the *ratio Anselmi* can be given a new interpretation. For example, *De Docta Ignorantia* relates the first and second definitions by stating that we can only attain God in an incomprehensible manner, because that than which a greater cannot be – ‘since it is simply and absolutely greater than can be comprehended by us’<sup>41</sup> -- is infinite truth. The relation between the first and second definitions established by the conjunction *cum* (‘since’) clearly corresponds to the relation between the transcendence and immanence of God which is the main type of coincidence of opposites discussed in this treatise.<sup>42</sup>

Among later texts which develop this argument further, *Idiota de Sapientia* II establishes a relation between the first and second definitions and then interprets this relation in terms of the fourfold structure. Here, the orator’s question how one can conceive a God who is greater than can be conceived is answered first in terms of that distinction between affirmative and negative divine naming which has been so well established in the earlier philosophical tradition. But then a more complex distinction is introduced:

There is also a consideration of God of a kind where neither affirmation nor negation befits him but according to which he is above all affirmation and negation. In this case, the answer is to deny affirmation and negation and their combination. Thus, when it is asked whether God exists, according to affirmation one must reply on the basis of the presupposition: namely, that he exists and indeed is the absolute presupposed existence itself. According to negation one must reply that he does not exist, since in this ineffable

---

<sup>40</sup>DDI I. 1-3 (h I, 5. 1-9. 28); I. 19 (h I, 37. 11-39. 21), etc.

<sup>41</sup>DDI I. 4 (h I, 10. 4-5) *simpliciter et absolute cum maius sit, quam comprehendi per nos possit*. Nicholas has already stated this ‘simplified’ version of the first definition at DDII. 2 (h I, 7. 4-5).

<sup>42</sup>In a sense, the two definitions thereafter remain permanently associated with the two aspects of Nicholas’ notion of *docta ignorantia*, i.e. the ‘learning’ and the ‘ignorance.’ This association is still detectable in a late treatise such as *De Non Aliud*. Near the beginning of this text, Nicholas speaks of God as that which is greater than can be conceived (DNA 4 (h XIII, 8. 23-24)). Towards the end, he says that God is that than which a prior cannot be conceived (DNA 22 (h XIII, 52. 5)). These two statements are connected by the paradoxical formulation – attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite – that the one thing known about God is that he precedes all knowing and conceiving (DNA 14 (h XIII, 29. 26-28)). On the last point cf. DQD (h IV, 5. 7-8).

manner of speaking nothing at all that can be said befits him. According to the assumption that he is above all affirmation and negation one must reply that he neither is absolute existence nor is not absolute existence nor is and is not absolute existence simultaneously. Rather, he is above these.<sup>43</sup>

This passage is instructive in that it identifies the negative (non-A/B), affirmative (A/non-B), and combined (A/B) terms of the fourfold structure with the negative, affirmative, and combined divine names (non-existence, existence, non-existence and existence) respectively. This leaves the neutral (non-A/non-B) term of the fourfold structure free to be associated with the definition of God as that which is greater than can be thought.

Several passages in *De Visione Dei* establish a relation between the first and second definitions, and then interpret this relation in terms of the coincidence of opposites, the fourfold structure, and the widened disjunction.<sup>44</sup> Having established from the beginning of the treatise that the God who is greater than can be thought is both subject and object of vision,<sup>45</sup> Nicholas goes on to develop this argument by transforming the notions of a coincidence of opposites – exemplified with the absoluteness and contractedness of God<sup>46</sup> – into the notion of a circle – where every divine name becomes convertible with every other divine name<sup>47</sup> – and then into the image of the circular ‘wall of paradise’ which separates us from God.<sup>48</sup> The argument becomes particularly interesting when -- with an implicit transformation of a circle into a square -- the fourfold structure utilized in other texts comes to the fore. Nicholas here writes: «You, O Lord [...] move with all things that move and you rest with all things that are at rest. And because some things are found to move while others are at rest, then you, O Lord, are simultaneously at rest and in movement [...] However, you are neither moved nor at rest because you are super-exalted and absolute

<sup>43</sup>IDS II (h V<sup>2</sup>, 32. 14-24) *Est deinde consideratio de deo, uti sibi nec positio nec ablatio convenit, sed prout est supra omnem positionem et ablationem. Et tunc responsio est negans affirmationem et negationem et copulationem. Ut, cum quaeretur, an deus sit, secundum positionem respondendum ex praesupposito, scilicet eum esse et hoc ipsam absolutam praesuppositam entitatem. Secundum ablationem vero respondendum eum non esse, cum illa via ineffabili nihil conveniat omnium, quae dici possunt. Sed secundum quod est supra omnem positionem et ablationem respondendum eum nec esse, absolutam scilicet entitatem, nec non esse nec utrumque simul, sed supra.*

<sup>44</sup>The connection between the two definitions of Anselm’s *Proslogion* and Nicholas’ argument in *De Visione Dei* is discussed in the first half of the excellent article DUCLOW 1982. This author’s conclusion is that the threefold structure of finite, limit, and infinite which he sees as implicit in Nicholas’ metaphor of the wall of paradise «expresses the implicit structure of the *Proslogion*.» (p. 26). Duclow rightly notes that there are also significant differences between Anselm and Nicholas, e.g. that Nicholas views the divine nature as inherently unknowable whereas Anselm attributes our ignorance of God to sin, and that Nicholas has a systematic doctrine of infinity whereas Anselm follows the traditional Augustinian model.

<sup>45</sup>*De Visione Dei* 1 (h VI, 5. 1ff).

<sup>46</sup>DVD 2 (h VI, 7. 1-18).

<sup>47</sup>DVD 3 (h VI, 8. 11-14).

<sup>48</sup>DVD 9 (h VI, 37. 7-12).

with respect to all things that can be conceived or named.»<sup>49</sup> This passage seems to combine the coincidence of opposites with the fourfold structure *a* by establishing a coincidence between the neutral term (non-A/non-B) and the affirmative, combined, and negative terms, and *b* by treating the combined term (A/B) itself as a coincidence of the affirmative and negative terms. In the former case, the opposites are specified as absolute and contracted whereas in the latter, they are specified as moving and at rest. A few pages later after the introduction of the ‘wall of paradise’ image, the fourfold structure reappears: «And when I see you in the paradise, O Lord, which that wall of the coincidence of opposites encircles, I see you neither enfolding nor unfolding disjunctively or conjunctively. For disjunction and conjunction are alike the wall of coincidence, beyond which you exist absolute with respect to everything that can be said or thought.»<sup>50</sup> This passage again seems to combine the coincidence of opposites with the fourfold structure. However, there are important distinctions between the two passages. First, the presence of the fourfold structure is indicated not as previously by the specification of the terms themselves – absolute, contracted, etc. – but now by the specification of the relations between them – conjunction, disjunction. Secondly, the reference to God as within the wall of paradise shows either that God has become a separate term beyond coincidence *b* or that God has become a separate term beyond both coincidence *a* and coincidence *b*.<sup>51</sup>

#### 4 The Theory of Maxima

As we have seen, there are four aspects of the *ratio Anselmi* which form the starting-points of Nicholas’ innovations. These are: the specification of the two definitions as the affirmative and negative sides of a single relation, the reduction of the emphasis upon demonstration, the specification of the two definitions as a distinction between kinds of maxima, and the replacement of the contextualization in dialectic with a contextualization in geometry. We should turn now to the distinction between kinds of

---

<sup>49</sup>DVD 9 (h VI, 35. 5-13) *tu, domine [...] cum omnibus, quae moventur, moveris et cum stantibus stas. Et quia reperiuntur, qui aliis stantibus moventur, tunc tu, domine, stas simul et moveris [...] Nec tamen moveris nec quiescis, quia es superexaltatus et absolutus ab omnibus illis quae concipi aut nominari possunt.*

<sup>50</sup>DVD 11 (h VI, 46. 6-11) *Et quando video te deum in paradiso, quem hlc murus coincidentiae oppositorum cingit, video te nec complicare nec explicare disiunctive vel copulative. Disiunctio enim pariter et coniunctio est murus coincidentiae, ultra quem existis absolutus ab omni eo, quod aut dici aut cogitari potest.*

<sup>51</sup>Another passage relevant in this context is DVD 16 (h VI, 68. 7-12) where Nicholas connects the coincidence of opposites implicit in our incomprehensible comprehension of God with an ‘intellectual desire’ (*desiderium intellectuale*). The latter is directed towards that than which nothing is able to be more desirable – which obviously represents a more ‘affective’ version of the definition of God.

maxima. Given that the theme of the maximum dominates the treatise *De Docta Ignorantia* to such an extent that it grounds the distinction between the work's three books, it is obviously better to refer the reader to some of the earlier published treatments than to attempt a full analysis here. However, it may be useful to summarize the argument of book I as it develops in counterpoint with the *ratio Anselmi*.

In chapter two, the maximum is identified with a simplified version of the first definition of God: namely, that than which a greater cannot be. The maximum is also said to coincide with the minimum because it admits of no opposition.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the maximum is subdivided into absolute, contracted, and simultaneously absolute and contracted maxima. Chapter three elaborates the distinction between the 'simple maximum' (*maximum simpliciter*) which cannot enter into a relation of more and less and an ordinary maximum which does enter into such a relation.<sup>53</sup> In chapter four, Nicholas associates the maximum with the coincidence of opposites in several ways. First, the coincidence between the two definitions of God and the coincidence between the transcendence and immanence of God are understood as relations between two maxima<sup>54</sup> and secondly, the maximum is said to coincide with the minimum because that which is everything that it is able to be can be neither more than itself nor less than itself. Chapter five develops the association of the maximum with the 'infinite,' while chapter six develops the association of the maximum with the 'absolute.'<sup>55</sup> The theme of the maximum reappears in chapter sixteen where Nicholas explains that possibility and actuality coincide in the maximum. After repeating his arguments that the maximum coincides with the minimum because it admits of no opposition, and that the coincidence between the transcendence and immanence of God is a relation between two maxima, Nicholas also explains that the maximum which coincides with the minimum is the supreme measure of all things falling between a maximum and a minimum. Chapters seventeen and eighteen further develop the argument concerning the measure of all things by associating the maximum with the primary exemplar of Platonic philosophy. Finally, the theme of maximum reappears in chapter twenty-four where Nicholas explains that the 'name of the maximum' (*nomen maximi*) is the 'maximal name' (*nomen maximum*). This name is the biblical Tetragrammaton.

<sup>52</sup>On absence of opposition see p. 8-9.

<sup>53</sup>What Nicholas calls the 'simple' maximum corresponds to the absolute maximum. This maximum is the one studied in book I. What we call the 'ordinary' maximum (to which Nicholas assigns no name here) corresponds to the contracted maximum. This is the maximum is studied in book II.

<sup>54</sup>This passage was discussed in the previous section.

<sup>55</sup>On these terms see p. 10.

Nicholas' discussion of the maximum in *De Docta Ignorantia* shows the relation between this concept and the privileged terms of absolute and infinite and also between this concept and the coincidence of opposites. His references to the maximum in certain later texts show the relation between this concept and the coincidence of opposites and also the relation between this concept and the disjunction.<sup>56</sup>

In *De Beryllo*, Nicholas develops an analogy between a beryl stone which corrects the deficiencies of physical vision by having simultaneously a form of convex and concave and an intellectual beryl which corrects the deficiencies of intellectual vision by having simultaneously a form of maximum and minimum.<sup>57</sup> The process of correction – which involves the straightening of the refracted line of vision whereby we perceive the world in its difference and multiplicity by means of a coincidence of opposites – is described as follows: «Let us apply the beryl to mental eyes, and let us see through the maximum than which nothing can be greater and likewise through the minimum through which nothing can be less. And we see the principle which is before everything great and small – completely simple with respect to every mode of division – and through which everything great and small is divisible.»<sup>58</sup> In this text, what we have termed the disjunction corresponds to the difference between the straight line and the refracted line in the angle of vision, the emphasis being placed on the reducibility of the disjunction.

*De Venatione Sapientiae* summarizes many of Nicholas' ideas about the maximum, the coincidence of opposites, and the disjunction in a passage where the notion of continuum plays an important role. Here, Nicholas contrasts an 'actualized-possibility' – which corresponds to what was earlier called the absolute maximum and is similarly associated with the coincidence of opposites – with a 'possibility-of-being-made' – which corresponds with or overlaps with what was previously called the contracted maximum, associating the former with the second definition of God. Regarding the actualized-possibility he writes: «For it is not possible for anything to be seen rationally which that actualized-possibility lacks, since the latter is actually and most perfectly everything comprehensible and everything that exceeds all comprehension -- blessed Anselm truly asserting that God is that which is greater than can be conceived.»<sup>59</sup> A

---

<sup>56</sup> Some of these later arguments are anticipated in *DC I.10* (h III, 50. 1-15) and *DC I. 11* (58. 1-60. 6).

<sup>57</sup> *DB* (h XI/1, 3. 1-5).

<sup>58</sup> *DB* (h XI/1, 8. 5-9) *Applicemus beryllum mentalibus oculis et videamus per maximum quo nihil maius esse potest, pariter et minimum, quo nihil minus esse potest, et videmus principium ante omne magnum et parvum, penitus simplex et indivisibile omni modo divisionis, quo quaecumque magna et parva sunt divisibilia.*

<sup>59</sup> *DVS 26* (h XII, 77. 2-6) *Non enim potest quicquam rationabiliter videri, quo ipsum posset careat, cum omnia comprehensibilia et omnem comprehensionem excedentia perfectissime actu existat, beato*

few lines below, Nicholas describes the relation between the actualized-possibility and the possibility of being made – which are now identified with simple and actual maximum respectively and also with causing and causable respectively – by stressing in the former case the disjunction between the two terms and in the latter case the continuum. «This is the basis of the principle of learned ignorance: namely, that with respect to things admitting more and less one never reaches a simple maximum or a simple minimum, even though one can reach an actual maximum and minimum [...] the causable is not the causing power, but rather the cause is potentially in the causable. The causable never becomes the causing, but rather the causing power turns into actuality at the limit of the causable.»<sup>60</sup> In the course of his discussion, Nicholas explains the relations between the creator and the creatable, the active intellect and the intelligible, and fire and heat in terms of the disjunction and the continuum.

### Interlude: The Question of Sources

In order to understand more clearly what we have termed the ‘Rewriting of the *Proslogion*,’ we should at this point insert a few remarks about Nicholas’ philosophical sources. Now it is impossible to determine whether it was the reading of certain sources which inspired the Nicholas’ innovations in doctrine or Nicholas’ innovations in doctrine which encouraged his reading of those sources, given the extent to which the hermeneutics and the metaphysics of pre-modern philosophers and especially the hermeneutics and the metaphysics of Nicholas of Cusa are implicated in one another. Nevertheless, it is illuminating to make a methodological detour into sources provided that this necessary qualification is prefixed. Indeed, the essential philosophical distinction between Anselm and Nicholas will perhaps be brought into a sharper focus in this way.

One of the most important sources used by Nicholas but not by Anselm is Thierry of Chartres.<sup>61</sup> Nicholas appears not to know this author by name, although the combination of lavish praise for an anonymous commentator on Boethius’ theological writings in the *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*<sup>62</sup> and the repeated occurrence of Thierry’s very distinctive teachings in Nicholas’ other works makes the debt unmistakable. In *De Docta Ignorantia*, Nicholas

---

*Anselmo veraciter asserente Deum esse maius quam concipi possit.*

<sup>60</sup> DVS 26 (h XII, 79. 1-10) *Haec est ratio regulae doctae ignorantiae, quod in recipientibus magis et minus numquam devenitur ad maximum simpliciter vel minimum simpliciter, licet bene ad actum maximum et minimum [...] non est factibilitas potentia faciens, sed in ipsa factibilitate faciens est in potentia. Factibile enim numquam fit faciens, sed potentia faciens in termino factibilitatis in actum pervenit..*

<sup>61</sup> Chronology obviously plays a role here, since Thierry of Chartres was active in the second and third decades of the twelfth century, i.e. one generation after Anselm.

<sup>62</sup> *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* (h II, 24. 5-7).

quotes the distinction between absolute necessity, determinate necessity, determinate possibility, and absolute possibility established by Thierry<sup>63</sup> and, although reducing the four terms to three by identifying absolute necessity and absolute possibility, articulates a fourfold structure of the logical form A/non-B, A/B, non-A/B, non-A/non-B within a discussion of the contracted maximum.<sup>64</sup> Another source peculiar to Nicholas is Dionysius the Areopagite.<sup>65</sup> One could argue that this Christian Platonic writer -- whom almost everyone before Lorenzo Valla assumed to have composed his treatises during the apostolic period -- played a more fundamental role in determining the direction of Nicholas' own philosophical speculation than did any other. It was from Dionysius that the idea of a polysemous negation representing *a* differentiation (non-being meaning 'other than being') and *b* superiority (non-being meaning 'above being') and again *b1* intensification (above being meaning 'increased being') and *b2* transcendence (above being meaning 'surpassing being') was learned. Given that the negative represents a comparison of more or less in the second, third, and fourth senses, but enters into a strict binary opposition with the affirmative in the first sense, negation as such becomes a symbol of the inseparability between the metaphysical ideas of continuum and disjunction.<sup>66</sup> Another important source used by Nicholas but not by Anselm is Proclus.<sup>67</sup> This pagan Platonist is cited frequently by name in Nicholas' later writings, one of the interlocutors in his dialogue *De Non Aliud*<sup>68</sup> being the translator into Latin of Proclus' *Theologia Platonis* and the speaker assigned the task of expounding at length the doctrine contained there. In *De Principio*, Nicholas notes the distinction between participating, participated, and unparticipated principles established by Proclus and, by expanding the three terms to four by combining and separating the participating and participated terms, articulates a fourfold structure of the logical form A/non-B, A/B, non-A/B, non-A/non-B within a discussion of the divine names.<sup>69</sup> If the Dionysian idea of polysemous negation is applied to this scheme in such a manner that the un-participated term can be construed as the 'intensely participated' term, one can perhaps at last see clearly

---

<sup>63</sup>Thierry (and Nicholas) speak of 'necessity of involvement' (*necessitas complexionis*) rather than determinate necessity, following the terminology of Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae* which was the original source of the doctrine.

<sup>64</sup>*DDI* II. 7-10 (h I). On Nicholas' use of Thierry of Chartres see McTIGHE 1958.

<sup>65</sup>Although Anselm could have known Dionysius, he seems to have preferred the less obviously apophatic writers Augustine and Boethius.

<sup>66</sup>On Nicholas' use of Dionysius see the chapter «Die Präferenz für Ps.-Dionysius bei Nikolaus von Kues und seinem italienischen Umfeld» in SINGER 2002.

<sup>67</sup>Since works of Proclus were first translated into Latin in the late thirteenth century, they were not available to Anselm.

<sup>68</sup>*De Non Aliud* 1 (h XIII, 3. 1-9).

<sup>69</sup>*De Principio* (h X/2b, 36. 1-17). On Nicholas' use of Proclus see BEIERWALTES 2000.

how Nicholas conceives the strange relation of identity-difference between absolute and actual maxima.

These authors representing direct sources of specific passages and arguments in Nicholas of Cusa's writings might be contrasted with certain other authors who probably constitute indirect sources. Moreover, given the importance of the fourfold structure of the logical form A/non-B, A/B, non-A/B, non-A/non-B, two authors who exploit this scheme extensively might be singled out here for special mention. The first of these probable indirect sources is Eriugena who introduced the fourfold structure in order to "divide" nature into creating and not created, creating and created, not creating and created, and neither creating nor created, and then employed this division as the structural basis of his treatise *Periphyseon*. Nicholas' familiarity with this writer is proven by his explicit references in *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* to the author alone under the name *Iohannes Scotigena*<sup>70</sup> and to the author and his work with the words *Iohannis Scotigenae Peri Physeos*.<sup>71</sup> That Nicholas had actually studied at least part of Eriugena's work with care is shown by the existence of a set of marginal glosses to *Periphyseon*, book I written in his own hand in the MS *London, Brit. Libr., Addit. 11035* (tenth century).<sup>72</sup> These glosses draw attention to specific ideas in Eriugena's treatise in the areas of theology and logic such as the unknowability of God, the application of contraries to God, and the *quasi*-identity between God and creation, and occasionally develop these ideas further: for instance, by recasting Eriugena's account of emanative procession in terms of "contraction" (*contractio*). The second probable indirect source of Nicholas' thought is Honorius Augustodunensis who paraphrased and excerpted Eriugena's treatise in order to produce a new work entitled *Clavis Physicae*. Nicholas' familiarity with the work if not with its writer is proven by his explicit reference again in *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* to something called the *Clavis Physicae Theodori*.<sup>73</sup> The existence of a set of marginal glosses to this *Clavis Physicae* written in his own hand in the MS *Paris, Bibl. Nat. lat. 6734* (twelfth century) shows that Nicholas had studied this Eriugenian paraphrase also with care.<sup>74</sup> These glosses draw attention to specific ideas in Honorius' treatise mainly in the area of Christian anthropology such as the nature of the resurrection body and the plenitude of humanity in Adam. Now in actual fact, Nicholas does not draw specific attention to the use of the fourfold structure in either Eriugena's treatise or Honorius' re-working of the latter. However, this

<sup>70</sup>ADI 30 (h II. 21. 2).

<sup>71</sup>ADI 43 (h II, 29. 17-30. 1).

<sup>72</sup>See INSTITUT FÜR CUSANUSFORSCHUNG 1963 (with the actual text of the marginalia on pp. 86-100 of this publication).

<sup>73</sup>ADI 43 (h II, 29. 17).

<sup>74</sup>See Honorius Augustodunensis, *Clavis Physicae*, ed. LUCENTINI 1974, p. xii and plate iv.



is probably because he saw the dialectical methodology that it implied as absolutely fundamental or even self-evident, and his frequent habit in glossing these and other texts is to pass over in silence points that have been rehearsed time and time again in his own writings.

## 5 Nicholas' Subjective Theory

Returning to the distinction made earlier between the objective and ontological and the subjective and epistemological aspects, we should now follow the second of these two trajectories in Nicholas' thought with the help of his dialogue *Idiota de Mente*. Once again, we may perhaps distinguish the three philosophical ideas which the fifteenth-century writer shares with his predecessors in the Neoplatonic tradition: the oppositional structure with a privileged term, the continuum, and the combination of the continuum with a disjunction; and the three ideas constituting innovations on the later writer's part: the new privileged terms, the continuum as coincidence of opposites or as fourfold structure, and the widening of the disjunction.<sup>75</sup>

### 5.1 The oppositional structure with a privileged term

For Nicholas of Cusa and his Neoplatonic sources, reality in the subjective<sup>76</sup> sense also consists of a series of oppositions each containing a superior (+) and an inferior (-) term, the most important of these oppositions again being unity (+) and multiplicity (-), sameness (+) and otherness (-), rest (+) and motion (-), and eternity (+) and time (-). This structure emerges clearly in *Idiota de Mente* where Nicholas compares the enfolding and unfolding of the divine mind with the enfolding and unfolding of the human mind, what is enfolded or unfolded in these divine and human processes of thinking being the series of oppositions listed above.<sup>77</sup> The epistemological theory is complicated by Nicholas' arguments that the human mind is strictly an image rather than an unfolding of the divine mind, that the divine mind has a formative whereas the human mind has a conformative activity, and that the divine mind enfolds things that themselves enfold. It should also be noted that the enfolding and unfolding of both the divine and the human minds take place both with respect to 'concepts' (*notiones*) and with respect to 'words' (*nomina*).<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup>In what follows, we will not study all the categories applicable within the "objective" theory also within its "subjective" counterpart, since this task has already been accomplished in part during the earlier discussions.

<sup>76</sup>For the objective theory see p. 6.

<sup>77</sup>*Idiota de Mente* 4 (h V<sup>2</sup>, 74. 12-25).

<sup>78</sup>See *IDM* 4 (h V<sup>2</sup>, 74. 1-79. 10) for concepts and *IDM* 2 (h V<sup>2</sup>, 58. 1-68. 16) for words.

## 5.2 The Continuum

The process of divine thinking that unfolds concepts and words and the process of human thinking that on the one hand conforms to this thinking and on the other forms its own thinking represent not so much the establishment of a discrete network of ideas as the discrete marking of a continuum. The unity of this continuum is indicated from the side of the creature by his discussion of the ‘assimilative power’ (*vis assimilativa*) which permits the human mind as unity to become every kind of multiplicity. Thus, the human mind from being the unity of the point can assimilate itself to the line and from being the unity of the now can assimilate itself to time.<sup>79</sup>

## 6 The New Privileged Terms

The oppositions of absolute (+) and contracted (-) and of infinite (+) and finite (-) that are emphasized more by Nicholas than by earlier Neoplatonists also play a significant role in the epistemological context. In *Idiota de Mente*, the human mind is said to be able to achieve as a highest level of contemplation the ‘intuition of absolute truth’ (*intuitio veritatis absolutae*) where everything is seen without multiplicity or difference,<sup>80</sup> and similarly the human mind is said to ‘elevate itself to infinity’ (*se ad infinitatem elevare*) when it sees that all the exemplars or Forms of things are one.<sup>81</sup> It should be noted that the human mind – which is a contracted and finite being – does not become identified with the absolute or the infinite itself in these moments of contemplation.

### 6.1 The Widening of the Disjunction

The argument that the sphere of the creature is dominated by proportion whereas there is no proportion between the creature and God -- together with the widening of the disjunction in the continuum of causal connection resulting from this argument -- is the basis of some of the most far-reaching developments in Nicholas’ epistemology. It is at this point that the famous theory of ‘conjectures’ (*coniecturae*) to which Nicholas devoted an entire treatise comes into play,<sup>82</sup> for a conjecture basically amounts to a special

<sup>79</sup> *IDM* 4 (h V<sup>2</sup>, 75. 1-12). Cf. *IDM* 3 (h V<sup>2</sup>, 72. 1-14).

<sup>80</sup> *IDM* 7 (h V<sup>2</sup>, 105. 12-106. 1).

<sup>81</sup> *IDM* 2 (h V<sup>2</sup>, 67. 2-3) and *IDM* 3 (h V<sup>2</sup>, 73. 1-6).

<sup>82</sup> *De Coniecturis* (h III). The doctrine of conjecture stated in this work is extremely complicated, and we can only summarize those aspects relevant to the present topic here. Nicholas defines conjecture as ‘a positive assertion participating with otherness in truth as it is’ (*positiva assertio in alteritate veritatem, uti est, participans*) (*DC* I. 11 (h III, 57. 10-11)). Two aspects of conjecture are particularly important: 1. Conjecture is a positive assertion. The combination of continuum and disjunction is a combination of positive and negative. In a sense, conjecture treats this combination

kind of thought, argument, or theory which is produced in relation to the combination of a continuum with a disjunction. In a passage of *Idiota de Mente*, Nicholas' explanation of the human mind's introduction of number and proportion into things as it attempts to grasp the infinity of the extra-mental reality together with his insistence that extra-mental reality does have multiplicity from the divine mind provides us with an example of a conjecture.<sup>83</sup> In another passage, his provisional endorsement of the Peripatetic position that nothing can arise in the intellect which was not previously in reason or in sense together with his combination of Platonic and Peripatetic tenets in postulating simultaneously a universal through which particulars exist and a universal derived from particulars provides us with another example of a conjecture.<sup>84</sup> The thesis that there is no proportion between the creature and God is illustrated by a striking analogy between the Layman's physical activity of carving spoons and his intellectual activity of making conjectures. The Layman works not by imitating the forms of created things – as does a painter – but by molding his material until the proportion underlying the form appears.<sup>85</sup> We might paraphrase this by saying that the painter is an artisan who takes no account of the combination of continuum and disjunction – since he assumes the fixity of his object – whereas the Layman is one who accepts and exploits this combination in his work.

## 7 The Reduction of the Process of Demonstration

The subjective or epistemological theory derived from Neoplatonism and especially the innovations introduced into that theory by Nicholas himself provide the framework within which the *ratio Anselmi* can be given a new interpretation. In particular, a reduction of the emphasis upon the process of demonstration with respect to the two definitions of God is a consequence of certain developments within the context of that epistemology.

An argument in *Idiota de Sapientia* II is a good illustration. Here, the Orator poses the question of how one can conceive God who is greater than can be conceived and, after several dialogic exchanges, the Layman answers by explaining that God may be approached in terms of the fourfold structure. The intervening exchanges are of great interest since the Layman

---

with emphasis on the affirmative side, and learned ignorance the combination with emphasis on the negative side. 2. Conjecture is opposed to 'precision' (*praecisio*). This term seems to have 1 an absolute sense as *a* the situation where there is no longer a combination of continuum and disjunction, or *b* the fact that there is a combination of continuum and disjunction; and 2. a relative sense as the correction of a conjecture (see *DC* I. 10 (h III, 52. 1-13) and *DC* I. 11 (h III, 54. 1-57. 17)).

<sup>83</sup> *IDM* 6 (h V<sup>2</sup>, 93. 1-6).

<sup>84</sup> *IDM* 2 (h V<sup>2</sup>, 65. 1-66. 20) and *IDM* 4 (h V<sup>2</sup>, 77. 5-79. 10).

<sup>85</sup> *IDM* 2 (h V<sup>2</sup>, 62. 8-14). On conjecture see further *IDM* 5 (h V<sup>2</sup>, 82. 1-17) and *IDM* 7 (h V<sup>2</sup>, 102. 11-15).

argues as follows:

Every question about God presupposes what the question is about. Therefore one must bring into the reply with regard to every question about God that which the question presupposes. For God is signified in the signification if all terms, although he is non-signifiable [...] If somebody were to ask you whether God exists, you must say what is presupposed: namely, that he exists because he is the existence that is presupposed in the question. Thus, if somebody were to ask you what God is, since this question presupposes that quiddity exists, you will reply that God is absolute quiddity itself. And so it applies in all cases.<sup>86</sup>

This passage is instructive in showing that the process of questioning and answering and presumably also the process of logical inference is less akin to the discovery of a new fact than to the revelation of something concealed and less akin to the sequence between temporal moment *A* and temporal moment *B* than to the transition from temporal moment *A* (or *B*) to complete timelessness.

Several passages in *Idiota de Mente* explain what amounts to a non-discursive mode of thinking in more detail. At one point, the Layman explains the difference between confused reason and reason informed by mind using an analogy between an uneducated man and a trained scholar as follows: «Thus, reason makes syllogisms and does not know what it is making syllogisms about without mind. But mind informs, illuminates, and perfects reasoning so that it might know what it makes syllogisms about [...] as though an uneducated man were to read some book without knowing the meaning of the words [...] while there is another man who reads, knows, and understands what he is reading.»<sup>87</sup> Strictly speaking, Nicholas' analogy between psychic faculties and types of reader deals not with reason and mind but with reason and the relation between reason and mind, and therefore not with the temporal and the non-temporal spheres but with the temporal separated from and connected with the non-temporal sphere respectively. Nevertheless, that Nicholas sees the discursive and temporal processes of cognition as derived from a non-discursive and non-temporal activity of some kind is shown by his reference elsewhere to the mind's assimilative power by which as unity it assimilates itself to

<sup>86</sup>IDS II (h V<sup>2</sup>, 29. 18-30. 9) *Omnis quaestio de deo praesupponit quaesitum, et id est respondendum, quod in omni quaestione de deo quaestio praesupponit, nam deus in omni terminorum significatione significatur, licet sit insignificabilis [...]* Cum ergo a te quaesitum fuerit, an sit deus, hoc quod praesupponitur dicito, scilicet eum esse, quia est entitas in quaestione praesupposita. Sic si quis quaesiverit quid est deus, cum haec quaestio praesupponit quidditatem esse, respondebis deum esse ipsam quidditatem absolutam. Ita quidem in omnibus.

<sup>87</sup>IDM 5 (h V<sup>2</sup>, 84. 4-10). sic ratio syllogizat et nescit quid syllogizet sine mente, sed mens informat, dilucidat et perficit ratiocinationem, ut sciat quid syllogizat. Ac si idiota vim vocabulorum ignorans librum aliquem legat [...] Et sit alius, qui legat et sciat et intelligat id quod legit.

multiplicity and as now or present it assimilates itself to all time.<sup>88</sup>

Another discussion in *Idiota de Mente* contextualizes the above in terms of the fourfold structure and the coincidence of opposites. At one point, Nicholas summarizes the theory which he has been developing through many dialogic exchanges to the effect that the mind in the sense of measure conforms itself to four modes of being. «It conforms itself to possibility, so that it might measure all things in a possible way. It conforms itself to absolute necessity so that it might measure all things in a unitary and simple way, as in the case of God. It conforms itself to necessity of involvement so that it might measure all things in their proper being. It conforms itself to determinate possibility so that it might measure all things as they exist.»<sup>89</sup> What Nicholas understands by the second and third conformations is of particular relevance to our question of discursive and non-discursive thinking. Regarding the third conformation, he has argued that the mind employs itself as an instrument and considers its own immutability. It assimilates itself to forms which it has abstracted from matter, making conjectures with respect to mathematical objects. It here sees «that one thing is thus, another thing is thus, and everything is composed of its own parts [...] that this mode of being is not truth itself but a participation in truth whereby one thing is truly in this way and another thing truly in another way.»<sup>90</sup> Regarding the second conformation, he has argued that the mind employs itself as an instrument and considers its own simplicity which it is incommunicable with matter. It assimilates itself to all things, producing speculations with respect to theological matters. It here «contemplates all things without any composition of parts, and not as though one thing is this and another thing as that, but as though all things are one and one thing is all.»<sup>91</sup> Given the fluid manner in which Nicholas makes his conjectures, it is not clear whether the third conformation corresponds to the reason operating alone or the reason operating in relation to mind in the earlier passage, and whether the second conformation corresponds to the earlier passage's mind operating in relation to reason or mind operating alone. Nevertheless, there seems little doubt that the third conformation deals with the distinction and the second confirmation with the coincidence of opposites.

---

<sup>88</sup>IDM 4 (h V<sup>2</sup>, 75. 1-12).

<sup>89</sup>IDM 9 (h V<sup>2</sup>, 125. 4-8) *Conformat enim se possibilitati, ut omnia possibiliter mensurat; sic necessitate absolutae, ut omnia unice et simpliciter ut deus mensuret; sic necessitate complexionis, ut omnia in proprio esse mensuret; atque possibilitati determinatae, ut omnia, quemadmodum exsistunt, mensuret.*

<sup>90</sup>IDM 7 (h V<sup>2</sup>, 105. 3-6) *prout una est sic, alia sic, et quaelibet ex suis partibus composita [...] quod hic modus essendi non est ipsa veritas, sed participatio veritatis, ut unum sic sit vere et aliud aliter vere [...].*

<sup>91</sup>IDM 7 (h V<sup>2</sup>, 105. 13-14) *omnia intuetur absque omni compositione partium et non ut unum est hoc et aliud illud, sed ut omnia unum et unum omnia.*

## 8 The Geometrical Context

As we have seen, there are four aspects of the *ratio Anselmi* that form the starting-points of Nicholas' innovations. These are: the specification of the two definitions as the affirmative and negative sides of a single relation, the reduction of the emphasis upon the process of demonstration, the specification of the two definitions as a distinction between kinds of maxima, and the replacement of the contextualization in dialectic with a contextualization in geometry. We should now turn to the contextualization in geometry. Nicholas' preoccupation with mathematics in general and geometry in particular is displayed throughout his philosophical career in writings from *De Docta Ignorantia* until *De Apice Theoriae*, and in this final section we shall simply note the most striking example of the geometrical contextualization of Anselm's argument and add a few comments on the methodological principles underlying this contextualization.<sup>92</sup>

The argument in *De Beryllo* where Nicholas develops the analogy between the beryl stone which corrects the deficiencies of physical vision and the intellectual beryl which corrects the deficiencies of intellectual vision introduces various geometrical ideas associated with the trajectory of vision. Having earlier noted the analogy between the coincidence of opposites represented by the convex and concave surfaces of the lens in the physical sphere and the coincidence of opposites represented by that which cannot be greater and that which cannot be less in the intellectual sphere, he writes

Therefore when you see through the beryl the angle which is likewise the greatest and the least that can be formed, your sight will not be limited by any angle but by the single line which is the principle of the angles. This is the principle of the angles on the surface, indivisible with respect to every mode of division by which the angles are divisible. Thus, in the same manner that you see this, so may you see the absolute first principle through the mirror in an enigma.<sup>93</sup>

The geometrical character of the thought-experiment summarized in this passage is reinforced by the immediately preceding instructions to draw various diagrams. Thus, the principle of the angles constituting the corrected line of intellectual vision towards the unitary first principle is to be depicted by the straight line AB with mid-point C, while the various

<sup>92</sup>Although Nicholas in the passages to be considered below places the emphasis on geometry, in other passages he places the emphasis on arithmetic. As illustrations of these two contrasting approaches one might cite *DDI* I (h I) and *DC* I (h III) respectively.

<sup>93</sup>*DB* (h XI/1, 9. 8-14) *Quando igitur tu vides per beryllum maximum pariter et minimum formabilem angulum, visus non terminabitur in angulo aliquo, sed in simplici linea, quae est principium angulorum, quae est indivisibile principium superficialium angulorum omni modo divisionis, quo anguli sunt divisibiles. Sicuti igitur hoc vides, ita per speculum in aenigmate videas absolutum primum principium.*

angles constituting the refracted lines of intellectual vision towards the world of multiplicity are to be depicted by the movement of the line CB with respect to the line CA at point C. Linking the coincidence of opposites with the *ratio Anselmi* once again, Nicholas notes that the straight line is equivalent to an acute angle than which no angle can be more acute and to an obtuse angle than which no angle can be more obtuse.

A passage in *Idiota de Mente* explains how Nicholas understands explicitly the relation between geometry and the cognitive process and – because of a certain relation between magnitude and definition – implicitly the relation between geometry and the *ratio Anselmi*. Here, the Layman responds to a request to explain Boethius' statement that the comprehension of the truth of things is in multitude and magnitude by saying that the ancient philosopher was calling attention to the interrelated cognitive processes of separating one thing from another and grasping the wholeness of a thing. At this point it seems that the Layman is more interested in the wholeness which corresponds to magnitude than with the separation corresponding to multitude,<sup>94</sup> since he immediately goes on to argue that the wholeness of something is attained only by separating it from other things, that wholeness is where something is neither greater nor less than itself, that wholeness is especially studied in geometry and astronomy, and that the wholeness of something is attained by the process of measuring. At a further prompting from the Philosopher, the Layman draws the striking conclusion that nothing will be known unless everything is known on the grounds that individual things represent parts with respect to the whole represented by the universe, the simultaneously microcosmic and macrocosmic relation between parts and whole being illustrated on the one hand by the spoon which is being carved by the Layman and the universe which is created by God. After explaining a further statement of Boethius about the necessity of studying the *quadrivium* because of its special concern with such matters, the Layman concludes by summarizing the connection between the mathematical notions under discussion and the structure of dialectic:<sup>95</sup>

Everything that exists falls under magnitude and multitude, since the demonstration of all things takes place through the power of the one or the other. Magnitude limits and multitude separates. Therefore, definition which limits and includes the whole being has the power of magnitude and relates itself to it, while the demonstration of definitions takes place necessarily according to the power of magnitude. On the other hand, division and the

---

<sup>94</sup>In other words he wishes to exploit the geometrical rather than the arithmetical analogy. See n. 92.

<sup>95</sup>The emphasis is upon connection rather than identity. Nicholas prefaces the passage about to be quoted with a remark that the logical elements described are not themselves multitudes or magnitudes but 'fall under' the latter.

demonstration of division take place according to the power of multitude. Moreover, syllogistic demonstrations arise according to the power of magnitude and multitude. That a third proposition follows as a conclusion from two propositions is a matter of multitude. That the conclusion is drawn from universal and particular propositions is a matter of magnitude.<sup>96</sup>

Now the fifteenth-century writer does not explicitly argue from the relation between geometry and magnitude to the relation between geometry and the *ratio Anselmi* by means of the relation established by the above passage between magnitude and definition. Nevertheless, it would be implausible to argue that he did not at least subconsciously assume that Anselm's argument involves the idea of definition, that this argument deals with the idea of magnitude, and that definition involves the idea of magnitude. For Nicholas of Cusa therefore, the celebrated *ratio Anselmi* becomes in the last analysis a self-reflecting structure exploiting the ambivalently geometrical and logical nature of magnitude.

## Conclusion

Given the extent to which Nicholas of Cusa has transformed Anselm of Canterbury's proof of the existence of God, one might conclude that the title of the present essay 'Rewriting the *Proslogion*' has turned out to be something of an understatement. Clearly, the last medieval Platonist has not been content to repeat or paraphrase his predecessor's celebrated argument, but has rather transmuted it into doctrines which sometimes modify and occasionally contradict the expressed intention of the original author. Yet at a deeper level of reflection there should be no doubt that Nicholas of Cusa remains in harmony with Anselm of Canterbury. As we noted at the beginning of this essay, the argument of Anselm's *Proslogion* was designed not to prove one important philosophical truth but to form the logical presupposition of a number of interrelated doctrines. As we have discovered in the subsequent analysis, the recollection of this argument in Nicholas' writings between *De Docta Ignorantia* and *De Venatione Sapientiae* serves as the thematic nucleus of ideas about objectivity and subjectivity, about opposition, continuum, and disjunction, and about many other things. There is undoubtedly an important methodological difference between forming a logical presupposition of various doctrines and forming a thematic nucleus

---

<sup>96</sup> *IDM 10 (h V<sup>2</sup>, 128. 3-12) [...] omne, quod est, cadit sub magnitudine vel multitudine, quoniam demonstratio omnium rerum fit vel secundum vim unius vel alterius. Magnitudo terminat, multitudo discernit. Unde diffinitio, quae totum esse terminat et includit, vim habet magnitudinis et ad eam pertinet, et diffinitionum demonstratio fit necessario secundum vim magnitudinis, divisio vero et divisionum demonstratio secundum vim multitudinis. Fiunt etiam syllogismorum demonstrationes secundum vim magnitudinis et multitudinis. Quod enim ex duabus tertia concluditur, multitudinis est; quod autem ex universalibus et particularibus, magnitudinis est.*



of different ‘conjectures.’ Nevertheless, the aspiration towards a systematic unity itself – which can only result from the intimate relation between the *ratio Anselmi* and the divine image in the human mind – allows no room for disagreement between the two philosophers.

Stephen Gersh  
University of Notre Dame  
Medieval Institute  
stephen.e.gersh.1@nd.edu

## References

- BEIERWALTES, W. 1977, *Identität und Differenz. Zum Prinzip cusanischen Denkens*, Westdeutscher Verlag, Opladen.
- BEIERWALTES, W. 2000, “Centrum Totius Vite. Zur Bedeutung von Proklos’ Theologia Platonis im Denken des Cusanus”, in *Proclus et la Théologie Platonicienne. Actes du Colloque International de Louvain (13-16 mai 1998) en l’honneur de H.-D. Saffrey et L.G. Westerink*, ed. by A.-P. SEGONDS and C. STEEL, Leuven University Prehistory-Les Belles Lettres, Louvain-Paris, pp. 629–51.
- CRANZ, E. 2000, *Nicholas of Cusa and the Renaissance*, ed. by T. M. IZBICKI and G. CHRISTIANSON, Ashgate, Aldershot.
- DANGELMAYR, S. 1972, “Anselm and Cusanus”, in *Analecta Anselmiana*, 3, pp. 112–40.
- DANGELMAYR, S. 1975, “Maximum und cogitare bei Anselm und Cusanus. Zur Problematik des Proslogion-Arguments”, in *Analecta Anselmiana*, 4/1, pp. 203–10.
- DUCLOW, D. F. 1982, “Anselm’s Proslogion and Nicholas of Cusa’s Wall of Paradise”, in *Downside Review*, 100, pp. 22–30.
- GERSH, S. 1978, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena. An Investigation of the Press and Evolution of the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition*, Brill, Leiden.
- GERSH, S. 1988, “Anselm of Canterbury”, in *A History of Twelfth-Century Western Philosophy*, ed. by P. DRONKE, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 255–78.
- HOFFMANN, E. and R. KLIBANSKY, *Nicolai de Cusa Opera omnia iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis*, Meiner, Hamburg. 1932–.
- HOPKINS, J. 2006, “Nicholas of Cusa’s Intellectual Relationship to Anselm of Canterbury”, in *Cusanus. The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*, ed. by J. CASARELLA, Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC, pp. 54–73.

- INSTITUT FÜR CUSANUSFORSCHUNG, 1963, "Kritisches Verzeichnis der Londoner Handschriften aus dem Besitz des Nikolaus von Kues", in *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft*, 3, Matthias-Grünwald Verlag, Mainz, pp. 16–100.
- LUCENTINI, P. (ed.) 1974, *Honorius Augustodunensis. Clavis Physicae*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma.
- McTIGHE, T. P. 1958, "The Meaning of the Couple 'Complicatio-Explicatio' in the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa", in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 32, pp. 206–14.
- SCHMITT, F. S. (ed.) 1946, *Anselmi Cantuariensis Opera Omnia*, Nelson, Edinburgh.
- SENGER, H. G. 2002, *Ludus sapientiae. Studien zum Werk und zur Wirkungsgeschichte des Nikolaus von Kues*, Brill, Leiden.
- WATTS, P. M. 1982, *Nicolaus Cusanus. A Fifteenth-Century Vision of Man*, Brill, Leiden.