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The Dialectical Process in the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa

According to Ernst Cassirer, the philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) presents a new approach to the ideas of the One and the Many, which "form the two poles about which all philosophic and religious thinking revolves":¹

...Both principles [of "docta ignorantia" and "coincidentia oppositorum"], which had dominated theological thought for centuries, suddenly take a new turn in the fifteenth century. Their general significance is maintained; but they now receive a content of new problems and new interests. What had formerly been a negative principle of theology now becomes a positive principle of natural philosophy, cosmology, and epistemology. Nicholas Cusanus proceeds from his conception and interpretation of the idea of 'docta ignorantia' to an acute criticism of the Aristotelian logic and the Aristotelian physics. Aristotle's logic is unexcelled in the precise working out of contradictions, in setting up the categories by which the classes of being are distinguished. But it is unable to overcome this opposition between the various classes of being; it does not press on to their real point of unification. Hence it remains caught in the empirical and the finite; it is unable to rise to a truly speculative interpretation of the universe. The physical universe of Aristotle is dominated by the opposition between 'the straight' and 'the curved'; motion in straight lines and motion in circles are for him essentially and radically distinct. But the transition to the infinitely large and the infinitely small shows that this is a matter not of an absolute but of a relative distinction. The circle with an infinite radius coincides with the straight line; the infinitely small arc is indistinguishable from its chord.²

Another modern author, Abel Rey,³ in his introduction to the French translation of *De Docta Ignorantia*, gives credit to Cusa for having done away with the universe of "natures" and for reducing everything to mere process, to creative transition. He, too, is impressed with Cusa's pivotal idea of limit which, in his opinion, dominates all modern philosophy. Like Cassirer, he sees Cusa's whole thought converge around the simple example of the identity of opposites at infinity,—where the irreducibility of distinct natures is converted to identity. «La courbe et la droite n'ont, rappelons-le, pour le Cusan, aucune différence de nature et s'identifient à l'infini».⁴

It is plain that the One and the Many which Ernst Cassirer and Abel Rey have in mind is that of the natures themselves. Now, to maintain that natures are reducible one to the other in such a way, is to destroy the object

¹ Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. *A Study in the History of Renaissance Ideas*, in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, April 1942, Vol. III, n.2 (Part I, pp.123-144), p.131.—Part II of this important study appeared in the following issue, n.3, pp.319-346. Permission to quote has kindly been granted by the Publishers.

² *Ibid.*, Part II, pp.322-323.

³ Introduction to L. MOULINIER's translation of CUSA's *De la docte ignorance*, Paris, Alean, 1930.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p.30.—«...Nous songeons surtout à la substitution de l'idée d'harmonie, d'unité, établie par des rapports, et des rapports de rapports en place de l'unité substantielle ou essentielle: un système d'individualités concrètes, reliées entre elles par des lois, et non plus un système abstrait d'unité de 'nature'».—*Ibid.* p.11.

of science in the traditional sense.¹ The universe of data would belong only to the first stage of knowledge. In the traditional view the acquisition of knowledge consists primarily in an effort of the mind to dispel its own potentiality and confusion in the face of natures and of their connection. In the present conception, on the other hand, the real purpose and function of the mind is said to consist in this: having dissolved natures one into the other (curve into straight, say), the mind, becoming, as it were, the very root of all givenness, produces the natures anew by way of speculative creation in a Hegelian sense.

While the problem of the One and the Many concerns the domain of natures, their distinction and coordination, it is not wholly confined to the manner in which *things* are one and many. There is also a "one and many" on the part of the knower.² This becomes clear enough if we only consider the distinction between the sensible singular and the sensible universal. The concept or intelligible species by means of which we know

¹ Abel Rey is fully aware of this. «Nous avons déjà vu que [la théorie de la connaissance moderne], au contraire de la [théorie médiévale] et au contraire de l'aristotélisme, mais en appuyant la tendance platonicienne, cherche moins les résultats que la méthode, le 'tout fait' que le 'se faisant' ... La connaissance n'a point pour but de nous définir une nature, un être (ce qui suppose un processus fermé, ou fermable), mais de nous amener à des lois et de lois en lois, toujours à des lois, des rapports ... Les sensibles sont des symboles et non des êtres. Les intelligibles, non plus, ne sont pas des êtres. Ils sont précisément les liens créateurs et, pour employer un terme arithmétique que n'aurait peut-être pas renié Nicolas puisqu'il fait servir la mathématique au tout de la connaissance: des *facteurs*, des 'passages' efficaces, et en qui réside toute efficacité, dans le monde naturel». (*Ibid.*, pp.22-23). «Le relativisme auquel nous avons affaire est donc la connaissance d'une réalité, où la recherche des natures n'a point de sens, parce que la réalité est, et n'est que l'ensemble des relations, des passages, du *posse* à l'*acte*». (*Ibid.*, p.25). «De là encore l'infinitude virtuelle de cet univers, puisque avec l'assimilation créatrice de l'esprit on ne peut entrevoir de limite dans les rapports des choses. Et cette autre idée encore que l'unité du monde n'est pas une unité 'chosiste', mais une harmonie dynamique.—Enfin la conséquence particulière, qui se colore des tons les plus modernes, c'est que la science-mère, et en même temps la science instrumentale, l'*organum* véritable, vis-à-vis de toutes les autres, c'est la mathématique». (*Ibid.*, p.26)

² "The problem of the One and the Many is usually confined to the manner in which things in themselves are one and many. Yet there is also a question of a One and Many with regard to the cognitive means by which we reach what we know. The latter (we shall call it the noetic as opposed to the natural problem) is amply treated by St. Thomas who, in this connection, draws from Platonic, and more particularly from Neo-Platonic sources. His teaching on this subject (E.g. *Contra Gentes*, II, cc.98-101; *Super Librum de Causis*, lect.10) is as follows. For each object distinctly known we require a distinct means of knowing. Thus, the concept by which we reach the object 'circle' is other than that by which we attain 'triangle.' It is true that both objects may be known simultaneously by some common concept such as that of figure, but the genus 'figure' cannot represent them distinctly. Whenever, by means of one concept, we actually consider many objects, we inevitably do so at the expense of distinction. In fact, distinct knowledge requires in us a multitude of cognitive means directly proportioned to the multitude of objects we know. This dispersion of our means of knowing is due to the empirical nature of our mind. Any finite intellect, knowing things in its own mode, requires a manifold of intelligible species, but the number of species, the extent to which the intellect is broken up and scattered about within itself, will be in proportion to its specific degree of perfection. Thus, if our mind were of a more exalted nature, a single concept such as figure might well represent simultaneously the several irreducible kinds of figure with even sharper distinction than that attainable by separate concepts used in succession. Indeed, the Divine Intellect knows all things by means of the single intelligible species which is Its indivisible Essence.—The general concept by which distinct objects are known in confusion only, is called universal in predication ('secundum praedicationem'), whereas the intelligible species which represents distinct objects in their very distinction is said to be of universal power ('universalis virtute,' akin to Cassirer's 'concrete universality')"—CHARLES DE KONINCK, *Concept, Process, and Reality*, in *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 1946, Vol.II, n.2, p.142.

"rational animal" is one for all knowable men, yet the imagination forms new and distinct images for each man we can distinguish from the next. Indeed, whereas human knowledge requires as many distinct means of knowing as it knows objects distinctly, God knows all things in a single intelligible species which is His essence. True, we too somehow know all animals, including man, by the concept of animal, and we also know, in a fashion, all we can know by the concept of being, but such knowledge embraces much confusion.¹ To know man only as an instance of being, or even as an animal, is to know him quite imperfectly. Yet, especially in mathematical thought, we may attempt to overcome the manifold of our means of distinct knowledge: for example, when we define straight as a limit of curve, and thus try to generate, as it were, the very notion of straight from curve.² However, this attempt should not be looked upon as an effort to fuse the natures concerned into one nature, but rather as an endeavor to reach the second nature by means of the concept through which we know the first.³ This application of the method of limits is particularly possible and fruitful in mathematics: possible, because of the kind of infinity proper to quantity; fruitful, because it reveals new properties and allows for greater rigor and distinction. As we shall see in the course of this study, the authors who foreshadowed and finally outlined and applied the method throughout philosophy make up the mathematizing tradition from Anaxagoras, the Platonists, and the Neo-Platonists on through Nicholas of Cusa.

¹ «Pour connaître distinctement les natures, il nous faut un nombre de 'moyens de connaître', c'est-à-dire de concepts, d'espèces intelligibles, proportionnel à la multiplicité elle-même des natures. Le moyen d'atteindre le cercle est distinct du moyen d'atteindre le polygone. Il est vrai, cependant, que nous pouvons comprendre dans un concept unique des objets qui diffèrent par définition—mais cette sorte de réduction à l'unité ne va pas sans indétermination, sans confusion. Ainsi dans le genre commun figure nous n'atteignons pas le cercle ni le polygone quant à ce qui les constitue proprement tels».—CHARLES DE KONINCK, *La dialectique des limites comme critique de la raison*, in *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 1945, Vol.I, n.1, p.177.

² «Un fait incontestable, c'est que notre intelligence tend naturellement à voir les natures comme limites les unes des autres. Elle y parvient le plus aisément en mathématiques. Nous ne nous bornons pas à voir les éléments point, ligne, surface, volume, dans leur nature absolue et irréductible. Nous croyons les mieux saisir lorsque, en outre, nous pouvons les définir comme limites; lorsque, sachant fort bien que nous n'y pourrions jamais atteindre sans contradiction, nous procédons quand même résolument comme si nous voulions en quelque sorte engendrer ces éléments les uns des autres quant à leur nature propre et abstraite.

«Ce modèle mathématique peut, dans une certaine mesure, s'étendre aux natures physiques partout où nous pouvons concevoir, ou artificieusement interpoler un ordre comparable, sous quelque rapport, à celui des séries infinies et convergentes. C'est ainsi que nous pouvons en quelque sorte faire surgir la raison d'une dégradation d'*intellectus*. En somme, tout le *De divinis nominibus* est à base de cette méthode. Cette œuvre en particulier présente des difficultés insurmontables dès lors qu'on veut l'interpréter en un sens directement réel. Pour légitimer pareille interprétation il faudrait, du reste, ignorer les multiples avertissements de l'auteur».—*Ibid.*, p.179. Cf. also: JUVENAL LALOR, O.F.M., *Notes on the Limit of a Variable*, in *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 1945, Vol.I, n.1, pp.129-149; CHARLES DE KONINCK, *Concept, Process, and Reality*, in *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 1946, Vol.II, n.2.

³ "... Whenever we can define a notion as the limit of a variable containing it in inchoation, as it were, we somehow overcome the givenness of that notion: it is as if, from the notion of 'curve,' we were moving toward, and about to reach, that of 'straight' in its very difference, without dependence upon the distinct concept of 'straight.' Could this process be carried through to the end, our mind would be freed from the meshes of its conceptual network."—CHARLES DE KONINCK, *Concept, Process, and Reality*, loc. cit., p.143.

All the fundamental errors of Cusa's philosophy arise from a confusion of the two aspects of the problem of the One and Many: the real or natural, and the noetic. The identification of what is properly of the mind, with what is proper to the natures themselves, makes Cusa's philosophy and every philosophy in line with its primitive assumption quite predictable. Like the fundamental error of Plato, that of Cusa stems from a confusion of the *modus rei intellectae* and the *modus intelligendi rem ipsam*.¹ Ultimately this confusion is a subtly disguised form of anthropomorphism, since it causes us to attribute to nature itself an indetermination and morcellation arising from a limitation peculiar to the human mind. The results of this anthropomorphism, though they have been called the highest achievement of mystical thought, are singularly disastrous for theology. To conceive of God as the ultimate limit towards which all things converge, understanding this term in the technical sense, and to hold that the divine essence is essentially the fulfilled limit of creation, even when it is held to be such from all eternity, is a recondite way of asserting the reality of the impossible and of denying the absolute transcendence of God. Yet this is precisely what Cusa does. The manner in which he does it, however orthodox his intentions may have been, is a peculiarly insidious one, since although he stresses God's otherness and the impossibility of reason to have positive knowledge of Him — so long as it proceeds in its own mode —, in the end he reduces God to a mere objectification of what is not attainable by human reason. Now, the concept of "what is impossible to human reason" is fraught with elusiveness. On the one hand, for example, we cannot think that which is contradictory, such as "square circle," or "a one-sided figure with many sides"; we cannot conceive of man as being at the same time and under the same respect, non-man. Such an impossibility does not, however, derive from any limitation of the human mind. On the other hand, there are beings which may be called "impossible" to human reason in the sense that adequate knowledge of them lies beyond its reach. Yet, as we shall see, Cusa reduces the two impossibilities to one. As is clear from his conception of Divinity as the *coincidentia oppositorum*, God is the mere resolution of what is impossible in creation. This is something quite different from the impossibility of assimilating the Creator to His creation. Cusa's error is in some respects comparable to the doctrine that identifies God's own necessity with the creature's inherent necessity of being from God and with the necessity in our demonstration of God's existence. Yet, the creature's inherent necessity of being from God, and our rigorously scientific demonstration of His existence, can in no way be equated with the absolute and transcendent necessity that is God. However much Cusa will insist on divine otherness, it remains an otherness enclosed and measured by the creatures converging towards it.

The main purpose of the present study is to point out this devaluation of Divinity in the philosophy which Cusa advances under the guise of a deep and mystical understanding of His transcendence.² We believe

¹ ST. THOMAS, *In I Metaphysicorum*, lect.10 (ed. CATHALA), n.158.

² For an example of CUSA's interpretation of DIONYSIUS' *Mystical Theology*, see his *De Docta Ignorantia*, I, 16.

this undertaking to be most timely. Apparently, new theological tendencies are again coming to the fore, most of which are reducible to this same covert negation of divine inaccessibility. While the professed ideas and language lack forwardness and are less amenable to sharp analysis, they belong to the same tradition.

We have confined ourselves in this study to an examination of Cusa's doctrine concerning God and the creature. We will devote a separate essay to the problem of knowledge in his philosophy, for no study of his doctrine could possibly approach completeness without it. However, what we have set down will in no way be modified by the precise perspective of Cusa's epistemology. In fact, we believe it was preferable to present first of all that aspect of his doctrine which concerns what we call *ens naturae*.¹ A close examination of this point of view reveals at every step his confusion of the logical and the real. It was more important to show this confusion while he speaks of things in themselves than to set in sharp relief this same confusion concerning the nature of knowledge itself. For one might hold a false conception concerning the nature of knowledge and yet teach certain truths on the nature of the things known. His theory of knowledge, then, we shall present later, more as a confirmation of what is sometimes called the "ontological view," than as the reason why he believes things to be what he says.

Each chapter of this study begins with a synopsis of Cusa's teaching on the subject under consideration.² This is followed by a criticism based

¹ ST. THOMAS, *In IV Metaph.*, lect.4.

² The latest, and most authoritative, edition of CUSA's complete works is that undertaken by the Academy of Letters of Heidelberg and published at Leipzig: "NICOLAI DE CUSA *Opera Omnia*, iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita, Lipsiae in Aedibus Felicis Meiner." The first volume appeared in 1932. Owing to the war, this edition has not yet been completed. Previous to that of Leipzig, the latest edition was that published at Basel by HEINRICH PETRI in 1865: "D. NICOLAI DE CUSA... *Opera*, Basiliae, ex Officina Henrici Petrina." We have used this edition for the works not yet published in the Leipzig edition.— Since there is no standard mode of reference to CUSA's works, we have felt free to use the following abbreviations:

- A. — *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*. (Leipzig)
- B. — *De Beryllo*. (Leipzig)
- C. — *De Coniecturis*. (Basel)
- CA. — *Cribatio Alchorani*. (Basel)
- CC. — *De Concordantia Catholica*. (Leipzig)
- CO. — *Compendium*. (Basel)
- D. — *De Dato Patris Luminum*. (Basel)
- DI. — *De Docta Ignorantia*. (Leipzig)
- E. — *Exercitationum*. (Basel)
- F. — *De Filiatione Dei*. (Basel)
- G. — *De Genesi*. (Basel)
- L. — *De Ludo Globi*. (Basel)
- M. — *Idiota de Mente*. (Leipzig)
- MC. — *De Mathematicis Complementis*. (Basel)
- MP. — *De Mathematica Perfectione*. (Basel)
- P. — *De Possess.* (Basel)
- PF. — *De Pace Fidei*. (Basel)
- Q. — *De Quaerendo Deum*. (Basel)
- QC. — *De Quadratura Circuli*. (Basel)
- S. — *Idiota de Sapientia*. (Leipzig)
- SE. — *Idiota de Staticis Experimentis*. (Leipzig)
- T. — *De Apice Theoriae*. (Basel)
- V. — *De Visione Dei*. (Basel)
- VS. — *De Venatione Sapientiae*. (Basel)

upon the doctrine of St. Thomas, together with an indication of the pertinent consequences to which Cusa's thought must lead. It must be noted that when we expose the doctrine of Cusa, the arguments, unless the contrary is clearly indicated, are his own.

CHAPTER ONE

I. CUSA'S CONCEPTION OF GOD AS MAXIMUM, MINIMUM, AND "COINCIDENTIA OPPOSITORUM"

Cusa's entire conception of God must be read in terms of the method of limits. Hence, when he uses such expressions as *maximum*, *minimum*, *magis et minus*, they must be understood as limit or as variable ordered to a limit.

The basic point treated in the First Book of the *De Docta Ignorantia* is the notion and being of the "most." Cusa defines that which is "most" whatever it is, as that "than which there can be no greater." "Maximum autem hoc dico, quo nihil maius esse potest."¹ Now, that than which there can be no greater exceeds whatever is such or such only to a finite degree. Hence the maximum is necessarily infinite. "... Ubi est reperire excedens et excessum, non deveniri ad maximum simpliciter, cum excedentia et excessa finita sunt. Maximum vero tale necessario est infinitum."² That which is most whatever it is, is God. "Hoc maximum, quod et Deus omnium nationum fide indubie creditur..."³ "Nulla unquam natio fuit, quae Deum non coleret et quem maximum absolute non crederet."⁴ "Deus est absoluta maximitas..."⁵

Perfection possessed to a finite degree is created perfection. Now, finite perfection differs from the infinite in that, no matter how much it exceeds something else, it can always be exceeded. Hence, Cusa infers, no matter how great a creature, there can always be a greater. On the other hand, since any finite perfection can always be exceeded, likewise there can always be a lesser creature. "... Dato quocumque finito semper est maius et minus sive in quantitate aut virtute vel perfectione et ceteris necessario dabile—cum maximum aut minimum simpliciter dabile in rebus non sit..."⁶ Hence the entire created order always remains confined to the more or less which never attain the maximum or minimum. "Habui-mus in radice dictorum in excessis et excedentibus ad maximum in esse et posse non deveniri."⁷ The created order always has the note of inex-

¹ DI., I, 2, p.7. The abbreviations are explained on preceding page, n.2.

² DI., I, 3, p.8.

³ DI., I, 2, p.7.

⁴ DI., I, 7, p.14.

⁵ DI., II, 4, p.73.

⁶ DI., II, 1, p.63.

⁷ DI., II, 1, p.61.

haustible possibility, of potential infinity. "Consistentur igitur inter maximum et minimum omnia contracta, ut quocumque dato possit dari maior et minor contractionis gradus..."¹

This potential infinity of the created order is inexhaustible, for it can never be so actualized as to become an actual infinite. The reason is that, were it actually infinite, the creatures would make up an actual infinity of finite beings, i.e., of finite perfections. But this, Cusa says, is the maximum; and this is God. This maximum would be among the creatures; hence, seeing the finiteness of the constituents of this actual infinity, it would follow that God is finite. This, he argues, is of course impossible.

Ostensum est in praecedentibus omnia praeter unum maximum simpliciter eius respectu finita et terminata esse. Finitum vero et terminatum habet, a quo incipit et ad quod terminatur. Et quia non potest dici, quod illud sit maius dato finito et finitum, ita semper in infinitum progrediendo, quoniam in excedentibus et excessis progressio in infinitum actu fieri non potest—alias maximum esset de natura finitorum—: igitur necessario est maximum actu omnium finitorum principium et finis.²

Hence God, Who is the actual infinite, being actually all that would be if the potential infinity of the creatures were actualized, is, according to Cusa, the maximum as well as the minimum. Many of Cusa's examples are taken from predicamental quantity. We may compare the maximum to the number 2, say, as the limit of the series $1, 1 + \frac{1}{2}, 1 + \frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{4} \dots$. For 2 is, as it were, the unattainable maximum of the increasing sums of the series. The series remains open to ever greater sums. Each new sum differs less from the maximum, but none will ever be equal to it. Note, too, that at the same time the increasing sums converge toward a minimum, since any sum of the series differs by less from the preceding one, and by more from the next. Hence, both the maximum and the minimum of the series lie beyond the series, where they coincide. This again is in keeping with Cusa's paradoxical description of God as both "maximum" and "minimum."

God, says Cusa, is not a limited maximum, viz., a maximum of only certain kinds of perfections; rather He is the absolute maximum, viz., the maximum of all orders and of each and every perfection. In God every kind of thing attains its own *maximitas*.

Maximum autem hoc dico, quo nihil maius esse potest. Habundantia vero uni convenit. Coincidit itaque maximitati unitas, quae est et entitas; quod si ipsa talis unitas ab omni respectu et contractione universaliter est absoluta, nihil sibi opponi manifestum est, cum sit maximitas absoluta. Maximum itaque absolutum unum est, quod est omnia; in quo omnia, quia maximum.³

Thus, God is not only the maximum of such notions as unity, being, and truth, but also the maximum of stone: "... Absoluta unitas lapidis istius sensibilis et rationalis, est Deus..."⁴ and the maximum of the sun and the moon. "... Quidditas solis absoluta non est aliud a quidditate absoluta lunae—quoniam est ipse Deus..."⁵

¹ DI., III, 1, p.119.

² DI., I, 6, p.13.

³ DI., I, 2, p.7.

⁴ C., I, 10, p.83.

⁵ DI., II, 4, p.74.

Since God is the maximum, all things are in Him, and in this sense He is the maximum of actuality. Just as the infinite straight line is actually a triangle, a circle, and a sphere, viz., all figures that a finite line can be, God is actually all things that can be. "Postquam nunc manifestum est, quomodo infinita linea est omnia illa actu infinite, quae in potentia sunt finitae: habemus translative in maximo simplici pariformiter, quomodo ipsum maximum est actu maxime omnia illa, quae in potentia sunt simplicitatis absolutae."¹

To signify this presence in God of all things Cusa often uses the term *complicatio*. Note, however, that the *complicatio* is predicated of God Himself: "...Manifestum est Deum esse omnium complicationem..."² "Deus ergo est omnia complicans in hoc, quod omnia in eo..."³ In the infinite unity of God all things are united; because they are united in God, He is their complication. "Unitas igitur infinita est omnium complicatio; hoc quidem dicit unitas, quae unit omnia."⁴ Because there is but one maximum, the complication or unity of substance is not different from that of quality, nor is the complication of quality other than that of quantity; rather, all things have one complication, one unity, one absolute — God. "Una est ergo omnium complicatio; et non est alia substantiae, alia qualitatis aut quantitatis et ita de reliquis complicatio, quoniam non est nisi unum maximum, cum quo coincidit minimum, ubi diversitas complicata identitati complicanti non opponitur."⁵ God "complicates" all things in that all things are present in God in absolute unity, absolute maximity, absolute perfection. Hence God is the complicating unity of all things, the complicating quiddity, the complicating truth, for God is the absolute maximum in Whom are all things in their absolute perfection.

God is the maximum of actuality in that He is all that can be. But "all that can be," declares Cusa, is the maximum of possibility, for "all that can be" is not a restricted possibility: a possibility to be merely this or that, — it is absolute possibility: the possibility to be all things without any limitation. Hence, it is infinite possibility. God, then, is not only the maximum of actuality, He is also the maximum of possibility. Since there can be only one maximum, in God actuality and possibility are identical. God's actuality is not potency reduced to act; rather, from all eternity, God is actually all that can be.

Quidquid enim possibile est, hoc est actu ipsum maximum maxime; non ut ex possibili est, sed ut maxime est, sicuti ex linea triangulus educitur et infinita linea non est triangulus, ut ex finita educitur, sed actu est triangulus infinitus, qui est idem cum linea. Praeterea, ipsa possibilitas absoluta non est aliud in maximo quam ipsum maximum actu, sicut linea infinita est actu sphaera.⁶

Hence, Cusa names God the *Possest* (*posse-esse*), i.e., all that can be, that, God is actually.⁷

¹ DI., I, 16, p.30.

² DI., I, 22, p.44.

³ DI., II, 3, p.70.

⁴ DI., II, 3, p.69.

⁵ DI., II, 3, p.70.

⁶ DI., I, 16, p.30.

⁷ P., p.252.

Not only is God the maximum; He is also the minimum. Since God is all that can be, He cannot be less, for if He could be less, He would not be all that can be. And since He cannot be less, He is the minimum: the "most least," like the smallest possible quantity which is the *maxime parva*.¹ "... Quare maximum absolute cum sit omne id, quod esse potest, est penitus in actu; et sicut non potest esse maius, eadem ratione nec minus, cum sit omne id, quod esse potest. Minimum autem est, quo minus esse non potest. Et quoniam maximum est huiusmodi, manifestum est minimum maximo coincidere."² Again, because God is all things, nothing can be opposed to Him. And if, on the one hand, nothing is opposed to Him, and, on the other hand, He is the maximum, He must also be the minimum. In God the maximum and minimum coincide — He is *maxime* minimum. "Maximum itaque absolutum unum est, quod est omnia; in quo omnia, quia maximum. Et quoniam nihil sibi opponitur, secum simul coincidit minimum..."³ Just as the infinite straight line is the maximum and minimum of angle, God is the maximum and minimum of all things.⁴

The oppositions we encounter in the finite order are overcome in the maximum and minimum, where they coincide. As an illustrative example, Cusa proffers the "greatest line," which is both "most straight" and "least curved." Indeed, the specific distinctions between triangle, circle and sphere are surpassed in the infinite straight line which is their limit, and in which they coincide. The greatest line is a *coincidentia oppositorum*.⁵ Upon closer examination, the coincidence of opposites is more than a coincidence, and unites more than mere opposites. It is nothing less than the fulfilment of contradiction. For the coincidence at infinity is such that the opposites are predicated of the same subject: the straight line is a curve, it is a triangle, it is a circle. Hence *coincidentia oppositorum* is *coincidentia contradictionis*.⁶

Now, the maximum and minimum of anything is God: it is He who is the coincidence of all opposites and the *coincidentia contradictionis* of all natures. "Deus est absoluta maximitas atque unitas, absolute differentia atque distantia praeveniens atque uniens, uti sunt contradictoria, quorum non est medium..."⁷

Hence, any concept formed of God must embrace contradiction.

Oportet enim in divinis simplici conceptu, quantum hoc possibile est, complecti contradictoria, ipsa antecedenter praeveniendo; puta non oportet in divinis concipere distinctionem et indistinctionem tamquam duo contradictoria, sed illa ut in principio suo simplicissimo antecedenter, ubi non est aliud distinctio quam indistinctio...⁸

In the finite order, curve and straight are distinct. Does it follow that in the maximum they are indistinct? No — for that would make them

¹ DI., I, 4, p.10.

² DI., I, 4, p.10.

³ DI., I, 2, p.7.

⁴ B., 9, p.10.

⁵ DI., I, 13, p.26.

⁶ C., II, 2, p.94.

⁷ DI., II, 4, p.73.

⁸ DI., I, 19, p.38.

one, as they are one in the confusion of the common genus line. The answer is rather that, in God, distinction is at the same time indistinction. "...Ubi non est aliud distinctio quam indistinctio..."¹

The following consideration will dispel whatever doubt might remain as to what Cusa means. It is true that the kind of opposites we find in the finite order are absent from God. Yet Cusa carries into God the very natures here opposed: he predicates the diversity of God, but, he adds, in God diversity is identity. It is the contradiction itself which, in God, is not contradiction. "Omnis enim diversitas in ipso est identitas..."² All this is quite in keeping with what would be "at infinity" if, *per impossibile*, such a limit could be reached: there, curve would have to be predicated of non-curve without contradiction. According to Cusa, in the absolute infinity of God all opposition is overcome. Thus man, lion, the heavens and earth, are most truly present in God; yet this implies no composition in God: for, in Him, man is lion; the heavens are the earth; each is the other; each is God. In God they constitute the One.

Quis enim intelligere possit unitatem infinitam per infinitum omnem oppositionem antecedentem, ubi omnia absque compositione sunt in simplicitate unitatis complicata, ubi non est aliud vel diversum, ubi homo non differt a leone et coelum non differt a terra, et tamen verissime ibi sunt ipsum, non secundum finitatem suam, sed complicate ipsamet unitas maxima?³

Cusa's contemporaries were well aware of the implications of such a teaching, and his reply to their objections makes the unacceptable character of his doctrine stand out more clearly. The main difficulty he tries to meet by his distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus*. Reason is confined to the finite order in an absolute way; it is only concerned with what is more or less. Although our intellect does not positively intuit the maximum, it does attain the more or less as ordered to the maximum and it knows that the maximum is their *coincidentia*. Hence, when a Heidelberg theologian, Johannes Wenck,⁴ objected that the doctrine of *coincidentia* destroyed the root of all science, viz., the principle of contradiction, Cusa replied that although the principle of contradiction was indeed the root of our science (the first principle for man's reason, that is), in the higher order of human knowledge — namely, in human intuition, which is the act of the intellect — as well as in the divine order, the principle of contradiction had no validity. Nec sequitur ex coincidentia etiam oppositorum in maximo hoc 'venenum erroris et perfidiae', scilicet destructio seminis scientiarum, primi principii, ut impugnator elicit. Nam illud principium est quoad rationem discurrentem primum, sed nequaquam quoad intellectum videntem.⁵

Thus, for reason the number five is composed of the numbers three and two; and numbers are large or small, odd or even. The intellect, however, being a higher cognitive faculty than reason, sees all numbers as absolute

¹ DI., I, 19, p.38.

² DI., I, 21, p.42.

³ DI., I, 24, p.49.

⁴ WENCK wrote an opusculum, *De Ignota Litteratura* against CUSA's *De Docta Ignorantia*. The *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* is CUSA's response. Cf. EDMOND VANSTENBERGHE, *Le Cardinal Nicolas de Cuse*. Paris, Champion, 1920.

⁵ A., p.28.

unity. One number is not greater than another; the odd numbers are not opposed to the even but identical with them; five is not greater than three or two.

Nam etsi ratio tibi dicit, duo et tria, quinque esse praecise, eo quod hoc rationis iudicio negari nequeat: tamen cum ad rationis unitatem, intellectum scilicet aspexeris, ubi non maiorem esse numerum quinarium, quam binarium aut ternarium, neque alium parem alium impari, neque alium parvum alium magnum numerum reperies, cum ibi omnem numerum rationis, in unitatem simplicissimam absolutum conspicias, non erit haec vera, duo et tria esse quinque, nisi in coelo rationis.¹

Another example is taken from geometry. The fact that every triangle must have three angles equal to two right angles is true in the domain of reason, since reason proceeds according to the principle of contradiction. But for the superior knowledge of intellect, which proceeds according to the *coincidentia oppositorum*, a triangle has but one infinite angle which is at the same time three angles.

Cum enim ratione appraehendis, omnem triangulum habere tres angulos, aequales duobus rectis, et causam appraehensionis non aliam, quam rationem ipsam conspicias: ad profunditatem rationis viam habes, hoc est enim, a te ita capiendum. Ratio, quia ratio, ita iudicat, quia in rationali coelo ita esse necesse est, nam triangulum non habere tres angulos, duobus rectis praecise aequales: si hoc verum est, vel est per coincidentiam unitatis et pluralitatis, sive trinitatis et unitatis, aut recti et non recti, sive aliorum valde oppositorum, et tunc est locutio intellectualis mundi. Aut quia non est dabilis rectus angulus praecise, neque duo praecise aequalia, neque tria duobus aequalia: sic est locutio sensibilis mundi, qui cadit ab aequalitate rationali, in alteritatem sensibilem.²

II. CRITIQUE OF THIS DOCTRINE

If a limit were really attained, then the nature of the variable and the nature of the limit would be the same nature, e.g., the circle would be the polygon with the greatest possible number of sides. Nor is this to be conceived as a union of the two natures in some third, differing from the first two, and yet containing them in the eminence of its superiority, in the manner in which vegetative nature and animal nature are contained in the eminence of man. Rather the union of the two natures would be achieved in each other: the circle would be the fullness of polygon within the nature of polygon. While being properly circle, it would still be properly polygon, that is, non-circle. It would be as though polygon attained its own perfection by becoming identical with its contrary — circle.³

If, then, God were a real limit of the creatures, He would have the same nature as the creatures and His proper perfection would be at least of the same genus. God would be the perfect creature — the eternal fulfilment of all that a creature could or should be: the best possible creature, the "infinite" creature. Just as circle would be no less polygon for being the greatest polygon, so God would be no less creature for being the greatest possible creature. But although of the same nature as the creature, He would yet be distinct from the creature, because divine; and in that very distinction from the creature, God would be identical with the creature.

¹ C., II, 1, p.93.

² C., II, 2, p.94.

³ Cf. LALOR, *op. cit.*, pp.141ff.

He would be the proper perfection of the creature precisely in His distinction from the creature; yet this distinction in perfection would be identity in perfection. God would be the greatest possible creature because He is not a creature; yet His not being a creature would arise from His being the greatest possible creature.

Whoever adopts the view that God is the real limit of the creatures must inevitably accept all this mass of contradiction. That Cusa does accept it is evident from his doctrine of God as the *coincidentia*. In this connection, a striking example of *coincidentia oppositorum* may be taken from duration, showing as it does with equal clarity just what he means by such coincidence, as well as the falsehood of his teaching. In the maximum, says Cusa, diversity is identity — so that the past is not different from the future nor the future different from the present. “Omnis enim diversitas in ipso est identitas; unde eius potentia cum sit unissima, est et fortissima et infinitissima. Tanta quidem est eius unissima duratio, quod praeteritum non est aliud a futuro et futurum non est aliud a praesenti in ea...”¹

By contending that in the maximum, diversity is identity, Cusa must mean that, in the maximum, the past *quâ* past is distinct from the future; but, since diversity is identity, the past, although properly distinct from the future, is at the same time not properly distinct from the future. He must mean that, in the eternity of God, those things which are formally predicated or creatures — namely, past, present and future — are properly divine because they are at the maximum; and, being divine, they are properly identified one with the other. Yet again, since they are the maximum of formalities said of the creatures, they are properly created and therefore distinct one from the other. In identity they are distinct; in distinction, identical — for in the maximum, diversity is identity.

Another example is taken from accident and substance. When Cusa says that in the maximum, diversity is identity, and accident is substance — “ubi accidens sit substantia” —² he must mean that, in God, accident *quâ* accident is different from substance *quâ* substance, while in that very difference accident and substance are formally and properly identical.

Again, when he says that in the maximum body is spirit and motion is rest in such a way that there is a *coincidentia contradictionis*, he must mean that these opposites are formally and properly opposed to each other, and yet formally and properly identical. “...Ubi corpus sit spiritus, motus sit quies et cetera huiusmodi.”³

To clarify his teaching, Cusa gives the example of the infinite curved line identical with straight, where the difference is said to be identity and the unity, multiplicity. Likewise, in God, all difference is identity, all multiplicity is unity. Hence, although the essences of all things are in God, distinction is still identity, unity is multiplicity. In God, all essences are the divine essence; each essence is all essences; all essences are one essence.

¹ DI., I, 21, p.42.

² DI., I, 10, p.20.

³ DI., I, 10, p.20.

Sit igitur nostra speculatio—quam ex isto, quod infinita curvitas est infinita rectitudo, elicimus—transsumptive in maximo de simplicissima et infinitissima eius essentia: quomodo ipsa est omnium essentiarum simplicissima essentia; ac quomodo omnes rerum essentiae, quae sunt, fuerunt aut erunt, actu semper et aeternaliter sunt in ipsa essentia, et ita omnes essentiae sicut ipsa omnium essentia...¹

If this is to be understood as being against the principle of contradiction, then Cusa must mean that the essences of all the creatures are formally and properly the divine essence; that in God the creature *quâ* creature is properly divine, and the divine, properly creature. "...Quidditas solis absoluta non est aliud a quidditate absoluta lunae—quoniam est ipse Deus qui est entitas et quidditas absoluta omnium..."²

In all this context, without doubt, Cusa means a real contradiction, and not the mere appearance of it. The Thomists teach that God is properly and formally one nature, and yet eminently many. Cusa, on the contrary, holds—and says it with all possible exactitude—that God is the coincidence, the identity of contradictories. Any further question concerning Cusa's position should be dispelled by what he says of the infinite line: it is actually triangle, circle and sphere. As the infinite line is actually all the geometrical figures, so is God actually all things. Explaining the manner in which the infinite line is actually all these figures, Cusa makes it very clear that he takes the infinite line to be formally and properly each of these figures, for he says that it is no more a line than it is triangle, circle or sphere—as indeed it would, were it one of these figures formally and properly and the others eminently. He says that it is truly all the figures without composition—i.e., properly each and every one of the figures in perfect simplicity. "...Maxima linea non plus est linea, triangulus, circulus vel sphaera, sed in veritate est illa omnia absque compositione..."³

It is evident, then, that Cusa translates into reality the logic of the method of limits by conceiving God as the real maximum and minimum of creatures; that he identifies the divine with the created; and that this identity is achieved in a peculiar type of unity: an absolute unity which is absolute multiplicity, an absolute identity which is absolute diversity. It would seem equally clear that Cusa thought this translation conceivable because he misunderstood the traditional teaching concerning the divine perfection. Because the theologians and philosophers had taught that God is absolute perfection which contains all the perfections of the creatures in an infinite simplicity, Cusa feels quite confident that his doctrine of God as the *coincidentia oppositorum* is the refinement and clarification of the traditional doctrine on divine perfection. Yet, far from "refining" the doctrine, Cusa actually destroys it, as can be seen from a review of the Thomistic teaching on the subject.

In the true doctrine there is a formal *ratio* proper to God alone: pure act or *Deitas*. Although this *ratio* is formally one, it is eminently many, containing as it does all created perfections by way of eminence.⁴ But

¹ DI., I, 16, p.32.

² DI., II, 4, p.74.

³ DI., I, 19, p.38.

⁴ ST. THOMAS, *Ia*, q.4, a.2, c.

created perfections are of two kinds. Some contain in their formal and proper *ratio* the note of imperfection; e.g., "created being" has the imperfection of dependence, "man" has the imperfection of body. Because of this, they are called mixed perfections. Those perfections, however, which in their proper and formal *ratio* have nothing of the imperfect, e.g., wisdom, being, justice, are called the simple perfections.

...Scito primo perfectionem esse duplicem: quaedam est perfectio simpliciter, et quaedam est perfectio in hoc vel illo. Perfectio simpliciter est illa quae in suo proprio ac formali conceptu dicit perfectionem cum nulla imperfectione, ut sapientia, bonitas, et similia. Perfectio vero in hoc vel illo est quae in suo proprio ac formali conceptu dicit perfectionem imperfectioni mixtam, ut humanitas, aequitas, et his similia.¹

Since the mixed perfections contain in their formal and proper *ratio* the note of imperfection, they cannot be in God formally; for anything which in its very formality implies imperfection must be excluded from Him. Hence they can be in God in a virtual manner only. The simple perfections, their formal *rationes* having no intrinsic note of imperfection, are in God formally. It must be remembered, however, that a perfection can be had formally in two ways: either formally and according to its proper *ratio*; or formally again, but as contained in the proper *ratio* of a higher order. Considered formally according to proper *rationes*, one simple perfection is formally distinct from another, for their proper and formal *rationes* are not mutually inclusive. For example, the formal and proper *ratio* of wisdom and that of justice are formally distinct. Now, the simple perfections cannot be present in God according to this mode, since this would imply an actual formal multiplicity in God's essence. This type of formal distinction is impossible in God, Who is pure act.

...Perfectiones esse in aliquo formaliter contingit dupliciter. Uno modo in suis propriis naturis distinctas et limitatas, sicut in homine est esse, intelligere, et velle, etc. Alio modo contingit eas esse formaliter in aliquo superioris ordinis unitas et illimitatas, sicut in solis luce sunt virtus calefactiva et desiccativa et alia huiusmodi. Nec parum distant isti duo modi inter se. Longe namque excellentius est esse in aliquo secundo modo ut in exemplo dato apparet. Quamvis igitur perfectiones omnium generum excellentiori modo sint in Deo quam in creaturis, quia tamen perfectiones non simpliciter sunt in eo virtualiter tantum (eis enim non denominatur talis) perfectiones autem simpliciter sunt in eo formaliter, et non in propriis naturis limitatae, sed ut in re superioris ordinis realiter indistinctae et illimitatae...²

...Deus non habet omnes perfectiones in seipsis, id est, distinctas ab invicem in propriis naturis, sicut homo habet sapientiam, iustitiam, prudentiam, etc. Sic enim in Deo oporteret esse maximam compositionem, sed habet eas indistincte unitas in suo esse simplicissimo.³

The simple perfections are in God formally; but they are in Him formally as contained in the distinctly, uniquely and incommunicably divine *ratio* of pure act.

Because these simple perfections are formally and eminently contained in God according to the formal *ratio* of pure or infinite act, in Him they are formally infinite, and thus formally identical one with the other. Divine wisdom, justice, and goodness are so identified. However, this identification would be incorrectly understood by assuming, as Cusa did, that in God the simple perfections are formally identical with each other in such

¹ CAJETAN, *In de Ente et Essentia*, c.6, q.13 (ed. LAURENT), n.111.

² *Ibid.*, n.111.

³ *Ibid.*, n.109.

a way that the proper formal *ratio* of one is the same proper formal *ratio* of the other, as though in God wisdom and goodness were the same *ratio*, proper to wisdom and proper to goodness. Such an identification is contradictory: the *ratio* of one perfection, while being *proper* to it, would also be proper to a different perfection; each perfection would be properly identical with, and properly distinct from, the other perfection. Rather, in God, the identification is found in a third *ratio* of a higher order: the *ratio* of pure or infinite act, which contains these simple perfections in its incommensurable eminence.

... Scito quod duas perfectiones iungi, ad propositum, contingit dupliciter: scilicet *identice*, et *formaliter*. Identice quidem, ut si fingamus quod sapientia Socratis et eius iustitia sint unamet res. Formaliter autem, potest imaginari dupliciter. *Primo*, si fingamus quod propria ratio formalis sapientiae et propria ratio iustitiae sint una ratio formalis, ita quod illa una ratio non sit tertia ratio, sed sit tantum propria sapientiae et iustitiae ratio. Et huiusmodi identitas est simpliciter impossibilis, implicansque duo contradictoria. Si enim illae duae non sunt una ratio tertia, ergo non sunt una ratio: quoniam nulla ratio est identitatis formalis unius ad aliam, ex quo secundum se non sunt una. Et si sint una ratio, ergo sunt una tertia ratio: eo quod una secundum se non est altera. *Secundo* potest intelligi, si fingamus rationem sapientiae et rationem iustitiae eminenter claudi in una ratione formali superioris ordinis, et identificari formaliter. Et haec identitas est non solum possibilis, sed de facto omnium perfectionum in Deo. Non est enim putandum rationem formalem propriam sapientiae esse in Deo: sed, ut in littera habetur, ratio sapientiae in Deo, non sapientiae propria est, sed est propria superioris, puta deitatis, et communis, eminentia formali, iustitiae, bonitati, potentiae, etc. Sicut enim res quae est sapientia, et res quae est iustitia in creaturis, elevantur in unam rem superioris ordinis, scilicet deitatem, et ideo sunt una res in Deo; ita ratio formalis sapientiae et ratio formalis iustitiae elevantur in unam rationem formalem superioris ordinis, scilicet rationem propriam deitatis, et sunt una numero ratio formalis, eminenter utramque rationem continens, non tantum virtualiter, ut ratio lucis continet rationem caloris, sed formaliter, ut ratio lucis continet rationem virtutis calefactivae. Unde subtilissime divinum s. Thomae ingenium, ex hoc quod ratio sapientiae in Deo est formaliter non solum ipsa, sed etiam ratio iustitiae, et consequenter est ratio propria non sapientiae, sed alicuius tertii, in creaturis autem est formaliter ipsa propria ratio sapientiae, intulit: Ergo alia est ratio sapientiae in Deo, et alia sapientiae in creaturis; ac per hoc, nomen commune non dicitur de eis secundum unam rationem.¹

Hence there is a perfection, the proper *ratio* of God, which can in no way be said formally of the creatures in the natural order. Again, the mixed perfections can in no way be said formally of God. Simple perfections can be said formally both of God and of the creatures, not univocally but analogously. When we call God wise, we mean that He is wise not by the formal *ratio* proper to wisdom, but by the formal *ratio* of pure act which eminently contains the perfection of wisdom; when man is called wise, it is meant that he is wise by the formal *ratio* proper to wisdom.

... Omnes rerum perfectiones, quae sunt in rebus creatis divisim et multipliciter, in Deo praeexistunt unite. Sic igitur, cum aliquod nomen ad perfectionem pertinens de creatura dicitur, significat illam perfectionem ut distinctam secundum rationem definitionis ab aliis: puta cum hoc nomen *sapiens* de homine dicitur, significamus aliquam perfectionem distinctam ab essentia hominis, et a potentia et ab esse ipsius, et ab omnibus huiusmodi. Sed cum hoc nomen de Deo dicimus, non intendimus significare aliquid distinctum ab essentia vel potentia vel esse ipsius. Et sic, cum hoc nomen *sapiens* de homine dicitur, quodammodo circumscibit et comprehendit rem significatam: non autem cum dicitur de Deo, sed relinquit rem significatam ut incomprehensam, et excedentem nominis significationem.²

¹ CAJETAN, *In Iam.*, q.13, a.5, n.7.

² ST. THOMAS, *Ia*, q.13, a.5, c.

In man, the *ratio* of wisdom is the perfection of wisdom and not some other perfection; in God the *ratio* of wisdom is all perfection, for the *ratio* of wisdom in God is not proper to wisdom but proper to pure act. Hence, it is *simpliciter* different from the *ratio* of wisdom which is predicated of man; only *secundum quid*, in analogy, is the *ratio* one.

... Alia est *ratio sapientiae* in Deo, et alia *sapientiae* in creaturis; ac per hoc, nomen commune non dicitur de eis secundum unam rationem. Quod ut clarius percipiatur, exempla subdamus. Si enim quaeratur: *quid est homo inquantum sapiens?* respondebitur quod *ordinativus*, vel aliquid huiusmodi. Si vero quaeratur: *quid est Deus inquantum sapiens?* respondendum est quod *aliquid eminenter prae habens in se esse ordinativum*. Ubi manifeste patet quod, licet *ly sapiens* sit nomen commune Deo et homini, *ratio* tamen utriusque secundum illud nomen, non est omnino eadem; propter hoc, quia *ratio sapientiae* in homine est solum ipsa, in Deo vero est ipsa et aliae; imo nec ipsa nec aliae, sed altior quaedam *ratio*.¹

Cusa fails to make these distinctions, and this neglect leads him to make positively false assertions. Because in God there is one formal and proper nature which is eminently many natures, Cusa believes that in God the one taken formally and properly as one, is identical with the many taken formally and properly as many. Again, because all the perfections said of the creatures are in God in a state of absolute perfection, he thinks that this state of absolute perfection is proper to them. He fails to realize that this absolute perfection is not proper to them but proper to pure act. He does not seem to understand that these perfections, the mixed and the simple, attain absolute perfection in God only because in Him they are present, not according to their own proper *rationes*, but as contained in the eminence of a *ratio* proper to God alone. Nor does he seem to consider that the infinity which these perfections have in God is not an infinity proper to them but an infinity proper to God.

CHAPTER TWO

I. CUSA'S CONCEPTION OF GOD AS THE UNIQUE "RATIO" OF ALL THINGS

In *Physics*, IV,² Aristotle says:

It is said rightly, too, that the number of the sheep and of the dogs is the same *number* if the two numbers are equal, but not the same *decad* or the same *ten*; just as the equilateral and the scalene are not the same *triangle*, yet they are the same *figure*, because they are both triangles. For things are called the same so-and-so if they do not differ by a differentia of that thing, but not if they do; e.g., triangle differs from triangle by a differentia of triangle, therefore they are different triangles; but they do not differ by a differentia of figure, but are in one and the same division of it. For a figure of one kind is a circle and a figure of another kind a triangle, and a triangle of one kind is equilateral and a triangle of another kind scalene. They are the same figure, then, and that, triangle, but not the same triangle. Therefore the number of two groups also is the same number (for their number does not differ by a differentia of number), but it is not the same *decad*; for the things of which it is asserted differ; one group are dogs, and the other horses.

¹ CAJETAN, *ibid.*, n.7.

² Chap.14, 224a2-15.

In Cusa, we find this scheme applied to the various *rationes* of things. The *ratio* line is the same for a line of two feet and for one of three. It is true that they differ as two and three. But that is because we consider them with respect to what divides line, namely, the subject. If, on the contrary, we consider any line with respect to a sufficiently remote genus, the same *ratio* will be predicable of the one and of the other. Just as we can say that the equilateral triangle and the scalene triangle are the same figure, we can say that the line of two feet and the line of three are the same line, provided we suppose an intermediary, such as "straight line," which is common to all straight lines of various length. Let us now read a relevant passage from Cusa:

Adhuc circa idem: Linea finita est divisibilis et infinita indivisibilis, quia infinitum non habet partes, in quo maximum coincidit cum minimo. Sed finita linea non est divisibilis in non-lineam, quoniam in magnitudine non devenitur ad minimum, quo minus esse non possit, ut superius est ostensum. Quare finita linea in ratione lineae est indivisibilis; pedalis linea non est minus linea quam cubitalis. Relinquitur ergo, quod infinita linea sit ratio lineae finitae. Ita maximum simpliciter est omnium ratio.¹

Adhuc: Sicut linea infinita est indivisibilis, quae est ratio lineae finitae, et per consequens immutabilis et perpetua, ita et ratio omnium rerum, quae est Deus benedictus, sempiterna et immutabilis est. Et in hoc aperitur intellectus magni Dionysii dicentis essentiam rerum incorruptibilem et aliorum, qui rationem rerum aeternam dixerunt; sicut ipse divinus Plato, qui—ut refert Chalcidius— in Phaedone dixit unum esse omnium rerum exemplar sive ideam, uti in se est; in respectu vero rerum, quae plures sunt, plura videntur exemplaria. Nam cum lineam bipedalem et aliam tripedalem et sic deinceps considero, duo occurrunt; scilicet, ratio lineae, quae est in utraque et omnibus una et aequalis, et diversitas, quae est inter bipedalem et tripedalem. Et ita alia videtur ratio bipedalis et alia tripedalis. Manifestum autem est in infinita linea non esse aliam bipedalem et tripedalem; et illa est ratio finitae. Unde ratio est una ambarum linearum, et diversitas rerum sive linearum non est ex diversitate rationis, quae est una, sed ex accidenti, quia non aequae rationem participant. Unde non est nisi una omnium ratio, quae diversimode participatur.²

Hence it is obviously by following the scheme of predication that Cusa establishes the unique *ratio* of all things. Note, too, that in this order, a predicable, such as "animal" attributed as genus, has the nature of form; the differences are on the part of the subject — e.g., animal is predicated of rational animal. We believe the following text must be understood in the same light:

... Non est nisi una forma formarum et veritas veritatum, et non est alia veritas maxima circuli quam quadranguli. Unde formae rerum non sunt distinctae, nisi ut sunt contractae; ut sunt absolute, sunt una indistincta, quae est Verbum in divinis.³

St. Thomas, in his treatise on the divine ideas⁴ distinguishes the idea — namely, *that which* is represented — from that by which the idea is known, i.e., the intelligible species. The ideas are indeed the *rationes* of all things, their exemplary forms. "Quae quidem licet multiplicentur secundum respectum ad res, tamen non sunt realiter aliud a divina essentia, prout eius similitudo a diversis participari potest diversimode."⁵ Hence, while they are not really distinct from the divine essence, they are the divine essence only insofar as the likeness of that essence can be shared by different

¹ DI., I, 17, p.33.

² DI., I, 17, p.33.

³ DI., II, 9, p.94.

⁴ Ia, q.15, a.2, c.

⁵ Ia, q.44, a.3, c.

things in different ways. They are the divine essence as participable in such and such a manner. While the divine essence represents all things, it does not represent them as the divine essence itself, but as likenesses of the divine essence. That which is represented, is represented in its proper otherness — in likeness, not in identity. It is true that the divine essence may be called the *ratio* of man, and of other things, provided we understand this to mean that it is the *ratio* of the *ratio* "man," and of the *ratio* of anything other than God.

Cusa's conception of this problem is quite different. Not only does he reduce all natures to a highest *ratio* in predication, identifying this *ratio* with God; he also denies the very diversity of these *rationes* by formally identifying them with the divine essence. The infinite *ratio* of line is *una ambarum linearum*, and he calls God *ratio omnium rerum* in this sense. He holds, therefore, that in God, the distinct *rationes* are not distinct; the ideas, considered as "that which is represented," are a single *ratio*.

Sit igitur nostra speculatio—quam ex isto, quod infinita curvitas est infinita rectitudo, elicimus—transumptive in maximo de simplicissima et infinitissima eius essentia: quomodo ipsa est omnium essentiarum simplicissima essentia; ac quomodo omnes rerum essentiae, quae sunt, fuerunt aut erunt, actu semper et aeternaliter sunt in ipsa ipsa essentia, et ita omnes essentiae sicut ipsa omnium essentia; ac quomodo ipsa omnium essentia ita est quaelibet quod simul omnes et nulla singulariter; ac quomodo ipsa maxima essentia, uti infinita linea est omnium linearum adaequatissima mensura, pariformiter est omnium essentiarum adaequatissima mensura.¹

In *Metaphysics*, VII, Chap.17, Aristotle shows that it is senseless to ask the *why* of the *why*.² The *propter quid* is something ultimate. Nor does one ask properly "Why is Socrates Socrates?," unless one means "Why is Socrates a man? why does he have a bad temper?," or something of that nature.

Let us state what, i.e., what kind of thing, substance should be said to be, taking once more another starting-point; for perhaps from this we shall get a clear view also of that substance which exists apart from sensible substances. Since, then, substance is a principle and a cause, let us pursue it from this starting-point. The 'why' is always sought in this form—'why does one thing attach to some other?' For to inquire why the musical man is a musical man, is either to inquire—as we have said—why the man is musical, or it is something else. Now 'why a thing is itself' is a meaningless inquiry (for [to give meaning to the question 'why'] the fact or the existence of the thing must already be evident—e.g., that the moon is eclipsed—but the fact that a thing is itself is the single reason and the single cause to be given in answer to all such questions as 'why the man is man, or the musician musical', unless one were to answer 'because each thing is inseparable from itself, and its being one just meant this'; this, however, is common to all things and is a short and easy way with the question). But we *can* inquire why man is an animal of such and such a nature. This, then, is plain, that we are not inquiring why he who is a man is a man. We are inquiring, then, why something is predicable of something (that it is predicable must be clear; for if not, the inquiry is an inquiry into nothing). E.g., why does it thunder? This is the same as 'why is sound produced in the clouds?' Thus the inquiry is about the predication of one thing of another. And why are these things, i.e., bricks and stones, a house? Plainly we are seeking the cause. And this is the essence (to speak abstractly), which in some cases is the end, e.g., perhaps in the case of a house or a bed, and in some cases is the first mover; for this also is a cause. But while the efficient cause is sought in the case of genesis and destruction, the final cause is sought in the case of being also.

¹ *DI.*, I, 16, p.32.

² *Cf. St. THOMAS, In VII Phys., lect.17.*

The object of the inquiry is most easily overlooked where one term is not expressly predicated of another (e.g., when we inquire 'what man is'), because we do not distinguish and do not say definitely that certain elements make up a certain whole. But we must articulate our meaning before we begin to inquire; if not, the inquiry is on the border-line between being a search for something and a search for nothing. Since we must have the existence of the thing as something given, clearly the question is *why* the matter is some definite thing; e.g., why are these materials a house? Because that which was the essence of a house is present. And why is this individual thing, or this body having this form, a man? Therefore what we seek is the cause, i.e., the form, by reason of which the matter is some definite thing; and this is the substance of the thing. Evidently, then, in the case of *simple* terms no inquiry nor teaching is possible; our attitude towards such things is other than that of inquiry.¹

Now Cusa, quite logically, contradicts Aristotle on this very point, and at the same time offers the solution we might naturally expect.

Ego autem attendo, quomodo, etsi Aristoteles reperisset species aut veritatem circa illa, adhuc propterea non potuisset attingisse "quod erat esse," nisi eo modo, quo quis attingit hanc mensuram esse sextarium, quia est "quod erat esse sextario": puta, quia sic est, ut a principe reipublicae, ut sit sextarium, est constitutum. Cur autem sic sit et non aliter constitutum, propterea non sciret, nisi quod demum resolutus diceret: "Quod principi placuit, legis vigorem habet."

Et ita dico cum sapiente, quod omnium operum Dei nulla est ratio: scilicet cur caelum caelum et terra terra et homo homo, nulla est ratio nisi quia sic voluit, qui fecit. Uterius investigare est fatum, ut in simili dicit Aristoteles, velle inquirere primi principii 'Quodlibet est vel non est' demonstrationem. Sed dum attente consideratur omnem creaturam nullam habere essendi rationem aliunde, nisi quia sic creata est, quodque voluntas creatoris sit ultima essendi ratio, sitque ipse Deus creator simplex intellectus, qui per se creat, ita quod voluntas non sit nisi intellectus seu ratio, immo fons rationum, tunc clare videt, quomodo id, quod voluntate factum est, ex fonte prodiit rationis, sicut lex imperialis non est nisi ratio imperantis, quae nobis voluntas apparet.

He does not expressly state, here, the true reason for his objection; we may find it, however, in his very notion of finite and infinite *ratio*. For, if the divine essence is, say, the absolute *ratio* "man," it is because man himself has no real *propter quid* of his own. Ultimately, the divine essence is the only *propter quid* anything has. Any created essence is, as to its very *quid*, the result of a composition freely performed. The enquiry after the ultimate "what a thing is in itself" will always be reduced to the question "Why was it *made* to be whatever it is?" Cusa would answer: "Rational animal is rational animal because God willed rational animal to be rational animal." Even that which is signified by the essential definition, therefore, is what it is because God has arbitrarily composed it to be what it is. Whatever a nature is, it is always reducible to the ultimate indistinction of the maximum.

This, as we have already seen, Cusa applies to the case of numbers. Take the number two. What we would call its "intrinsic *ratio*" has a double reality: first in God as identified with the infinite *ratio* of the maximum, the complication of all things, the supreme distinct indistinction; and secondly as the finite number two. Now in Cusa's mind, we may ask "Why is two two?" To this question he would answer: "In the first case, the why is none other than God Himself; in the second, because God has willed the finite two to be two. Hence, twoness, in its finite mode, is the result of a free and arbitrary complication."

¹ Ross transl.

² B., 29.

The finite, too, is in its own way a complication — not merely, as we hold, because of the real many in every created *suppositum*: the composition of act and potency, substance and accident, being and operation; but because it is, even as to its very *quid*, the product of a voluntary agent.

All this is quite in conformity with the model of variable and limit. God, as we have seen, is the one complication of all things, just as the limit 2, though one, is conceived as the infinite sum of the variable converging toward it. The limit does not actually come from the converging series; God's complication is no outgrowth from the finite universe. A text already quoted is again to the point:

Quidquid enim possibile est, hoc est actu ipsum maximum maxime; non ut ex possibili est, sed ut maxime est; sicuti ex linea triangulus educitur et infinita linea non est triangulus, ut ex finita educitur, sed actu est triangulus infinitus, qui est idem cum linea. Praeterea, ipsa possibilitas absoluta non est aliud in maximo quam ipsum maximum actu, sicut linea infinita est actu sphaera.¹

To say that God is *omnium complicatio* is completely different from saying that He possesses eminently the perfection of any possible creature. It means, quite definitely, that He is conceived in terms of composition, even though real composition is at the same time denied. Cusa evades this contradiction by attributing it to reason.

II. CRITIQUE OF THIS DOCTRINE

First, we must point out an obvious confusion, in Cusa, of the notion of *universale in causando* with that of *universale in praedicando*. Because God is the supreme cause of all things, Cusa believes Him to be also the supreme *ratio* predicated of all things. The first cause of all things being divinely perfect, the *ratio in se* of anything He causes must likewise be divinely perfect. And, since the first cause of all things is infinite, the *natura in se* of anything He causes is also infinite. This confusion of the notions: *universale in causando* and *universale in praedicando* can be shown from many texts. Thus, when explaining the absolute being of God by the example of figure, Cusa first abstracts figure from the inferiors of which it is predicated (figure as *universale in praedicando*): circle, triangle and hexagon. He then considers that figure actually possesses all the perfection of these inferiors (figure as an *universale in causando*). So too, with God's being. After abstracting being from that of which it is predicated, Cusa identifies this abstract notion of being with God's being.

Adhuc mathematicae aenigmatizando considera, quomodo summa aequalitas quantitatum, ipsas ab omni pluralitate absolvit, puta: si concipis, circuli a centro ad circumferentiam lineas, ut describitur in pavimento, videntur esse aequales, sed non sunt, propter pavimenti fluxibilitatem et materiam, ita quod nulla est alteri praecise similis, ut in docta ignorantia ostenditur. Sed dum intellectualiter circulus in se consideratur, lineae multae in pavimento, non possunt ibi esse aliae et aliae, quia causa alteritatis cessat, scilicet materia, sic nec sunt plures. Sicut ergo de lineis dictum est, ita de omni quanto, scilicet superficie et corpore. Quando igitur video in pavimento, unam superficiem terminari figura circulari, et aequalem superficiem figura triangulari terminari, et aequalem, figura hexagonali, et ita de omnibus signabilibus figuris, et post haec considero, plures videri superficies illas aequales, ob subjectum aliud et aliud, in quo aliter et aliter describuntur: abstraho igitur menta-

¹ *Supra* p.220.

liter, a subjecto, et video quomodo prius una et eadem superficies, fuit mihi alia et alia visa, quia vidi in alio et alio loco, et subjecto. Et deinde adverto, quod una et eadem superficies, est circulus, est trigonus, et hexagonus, et omnis figura, qua superficies figurari et terminari potest. Per hoc aenigma, entitatem ab hoc et illo absolutam, video actu esse omnium et singulorum entium, essendi formam, quomodoque formabilem, non quidem similitudinarie et mathematice: sed verissime et formaliter, quod et vitaliter dici potest, et hoc aenigma mihi placet. Nam eandem superficiem posse esse circularem et rectilinealem et polygoniam et ejus praxim nuper ostendi. Esto ergo, quod possibile esse, ponatur actu esse, uti in theologicis fatendum est, utique tunc aenigma clarius dirigit: quia secundum mathematicae perfectam comprehensionem ad Theologiam, aenigma propinquius fieri posse, arbitror. Et haec de hoc, nunc sic dicta sint.¹

Conceiving God as the absolute *ratio* of creatures, Cusa may feel justified in saying that, in a certain sense, the study of God is an easy one. "...Nulla est facilior difficultas quam divina speculari."² For if one desires to have a concept of God, all he need do is to conceive of concept, because God is absolute concept; for a more precise concept of God, all he need do is to conceive of precision, because God is absolute precision; for a true concept of God, all he need do is to conceive truth, for God is absolute truth. In fact the study of God is so easy that any question asked about Him already presupposes the answer, for since God is the supreme *ratio*, He is signified in each and every term. Thus if one asks whether God is, the question presupposes the notion of being; but God is absolute being. If one asks what God is, the question presupposes the notion of quiddity; but God is absolute quiddity.

IDIOTA.—Nulla est facilior difficultas quam divina speculari, ubi delectatio coincidit in difficultate. Sed quid optas dicito.

ORATOR.—Ut mihi dicas: Ex quo Deus est maior quam concipi possit, quomodo de ipso facere debeam conceptum?

IDIOTA.—Sicut de conceptu.

ORATOR.—Explana.

IDIOTA.—Audisti, quomodo in omni conceptu concipitur inconceptibilis. Accedit igitur conceptus de conceptu ad inconceptibilem.

ORATOR.—Quomodo tunc faciam praecisionem conceptum?

IDIOTA.—Concipe praecisionem; nam Deus est ipsa absoluta praecisio.

ORATOR.—Quid tunc per me agendum est, quando de Deo rectum conceptum facere propono?

IDIOTA.—Tunc te ad rectitudinem ipsam convertas.

.....
IDIOTA.—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.

ORATOR.—Declara quaeso, quia nimis admiror, ut vix quae dicis aure percipiam.

IDIOTA.—Nonne quaestio, an sit, praesupponit entitatem?

ORATOR.—Immo.

IDIOTA.—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 quaesierit, quid est Deus, cum haec quaestio praesupponat quidditatem esse, respondebis Deum esse ipsam quidditatem absolutam. Ita quidem de omnibus. Neque in hoc cadit haesitatio. Nam Deus est ipsa absoluta praesuppositio omnium, quae qualitercumque praesupponuntur, sicut in omni effectu praesupponitur causa. Vide igitur orator, quam facilis est theologica difficultas.³

In all this we perceive the repeated confusion of the order of predication with that of causation. Thus, in the text from *De Possess* the most

¹ P., p.263.

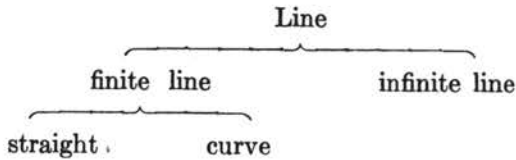
² S. II, p.25.

³ S. II, p.25.

common notion of being is identified with God Who is subsistent being; in the text from *De Sapientia* the most generic notion of truth is made one with God Who is subsistent truth. Because God is supreme in the order of causation, Cusa believes Him to be supreme in the order of what can be predicated; because God is the cause of all things, Cusa considers Him to be the *ratio* that is predicated of all things; because creatures are more perfectly present in God than they are in their proper being, Cusa argues that God is their proper perfection. This same confusion underlies Cusa's conception of God as *Possest*, as we shall see later.

This indeed is a deeply erroneous doctrine. Logically, its author must maintain that God and the creature have the same proper nature; that the most unique of all beings, the universal cause, is also the most common of all, the universal predicate; the very being of God is the intrinsic being of the creature. Indeed, one must accept these conclusions, if one conceives of God as the maximum and minimum of the creatures.

Let us now turn to a further criticism, related to the previous one, and based on the principle of predication with identity. Line may be considered as a remote genus; finite line as a proximate genus; straight and curve as species. This gives us the following schema:



Now, according to the principle quoted from Aristotle, the remote genus may be predicated of the species with identity, thus: straight and curve are the same line. But we may not attribute "finite line" with identity; we must not say: straight and curve are the same finite line. The reason is that the species divide the proximate genus, whereas they are not the proper divisions of the remote genus. The proper differences of line would be: infinite and finite.

Now, straight may be defined as the limit of curve. If, *per impossibile*, the limit could be reached, finite line could be predicated with identity. But the identity would be more than that of mere predication, for we could then say that curve is straight, the difference being only nominal. Indeed, they would cease to be species of finite line, since curve would coincide only with infinite straight. Yet it would be the two species of finite line which would be the same infinite line. Hence finite line and infinite line would have to be the same line. Line, then, would be the one and sufficient *ratio* of both infinite and finite, straight and curve.

It is only through such reasoning that Cusa arrives at the notion of infinite line. It shows clearly that he confuses mere generality of predication with universality of causation. At the same time, he destroys all the predicationally inferior *rationes*, absorbing them in the contradictory identity of the line, which is distinctly and indistinctly all that the inferiors are.

But it is not enough to point out that he confuses the logical and the real. The confusion involves, at the same time, an identification of the highest and the lowest in reality itself; worse, it reduces the highest to the lowest. He identifies that which is as a form in the order of predication with that which is form in nature itself. For example, "animal" as predicated of the subjects man and brute expresses what they have in common; yet, what they have in common is what is less perfect in man and is as a subject with relation to the difference, "rational." That which is subject and something determinable in nature becomes, for Cusa, the higher form in nature. This reminds us of David of Dinant, who identified God with prime matter.¹

Furthermore, Cusa confuses the objective *ratio* of anything with the intelligible species by which it is known.² Indeed, man needs as many formal concepts as he knows natures in their distinction. But the separate substances know the same natures more perfectly by fewer species. As we pointed out in the Introduction, this is a distinctly noetic aspect of the problem of the One and the Many. The confusion of it with the natural problem entails a negation of both *ratio* and of the *species intelligibilis* in which the former is attained. For Cusa falls a prey to the following confusion. On the one hand, according to him, the *rationes*, indeed the very *ratio infinita* can be attained only by identification with intelligible species — "that which" with "by which"; the very *ratio* of intelligible species, which, in this respect, is itself an objective *ratio*, a *quod intelligitur*, he must formally identify with the species as that *by which*, a *quo*, and thus he completely destroys the very notion *quid*. On the other hand, the intelligible species, being that "by which" the known is known, is also denied.

Nor is it cause for wonder that Cusa should formally identify that which the divine ideas represent with the *ratio* of God Himself and with that by which God knows all He knows.

By his conception of *quidditas absoluta* as the true quiddity of all things, he in a sense anticipates Leibniz's theory of identity, sufficient reason, and monads. This conception, however, amounts to a negation of the identity of a thing with itself, as is clear from the text we quoted from *Metaphysics*, VII.

CHAPTER THREE

I. CUSA'S CONCEPTION OF GOD AS "POSSEST"

Cusa's conception of God as the unique *ratio* is the foundation for his notion of God as the coincidence of absolute actuality and absolute pos-

¹ ST. THOMAS, *Ia*, q.3, a.8, c.

² "Species enim intelligibilis est quo intellectus intelligit, non id quod intelligit..." — ST. THOMAS, *Quaestio disputata de Anima*, a.2, ad 5.

sibility, i.e., of God as the *Possess.* Before examining this conception, it may help us to recall certain distinctions regarding the terms, actuality and possibility.

The word actuality has several meanings.¹ When used in all its generality it designates whatever may be said "to be" in any way. Thus understood, it stands for the logically common notion of "to be." This type of actuality or being can be said of both logical and real being; of God and of the creature; of that which is merely possible and of that which is actual; of substance and accident; of the orders of essence, of existence, and of operation. For "actuality" or "being," thus understood, refers us to the confused notion of "to be," by which anything is in some way or other. When confined to signify that which is or can be in the real order, the term actuality stands for the notion of real being. Within this order, it can be restricted to mean that which actually is, as opposed to that which is only in the sense that it can be; i.e., it can signify the actual as opposed to the possible or potential.

Again, actuality thus taken can be said either of the pure and absolute actuality of God, or of the participated and limited actuality found in the creature. The latter actuality can then be further divided into the various kinds of existing created being.

Of these various acceptations of the term actuality there are two which, in a special way, may be qualified as absolute actuality: first, the actuality of God who is absolute actuality in the sense that He is *esse subsistens*; secondly, the logically common notion of being which is absolute actuality in that it is predicable of anything that may, in some way, be said "to be."

Let us now turn to some of the meanings of the term, possibility. Possibility, in the sense of "able to be," is of various kinds. There is that which is opposed to the impossible. Since the impossible is that which implies contradiction, the possibility opposed to it can be said of whatever implies no contradiction. Thus understood, possibility can be said of the logical and of the real; of God and the creature; of the necessary and the contingent; of the actual and of the potential.

Possibile enim quoddam est *quod ad necessarium sequitur*. Nam quod necesse est esse, possibile est esse: quod enim non possibile est esse, impossibile est esse; et quod impossibile est esse, necesse est non esse; igitur quod necesse est esse, necesse est non esse. Hoc autem est impossibile. Ergo impossibile est quod aliquid necesse sit esse, et tamen non sit possibile illud esse. Ergo possibile esse sequitur ad necesse esse.²

When possibility thus taken is said of that which is in potency, it by no means designates that which is characteristic of what is in potency alone as opposed to act; nor does it mean that that which is yet to be, shall not necessarily come about. It merely means that to be in potency or to be in act, to be necessary or to be contingent, implies no contradiction, and nothing more.

Again, the term possible may be used to signify that which can be produced. Thus anything which, although it does not exist, yet involves no contradiction and thus can be made to exist, is possible in this narrower

¹ ST. THOMAS, *In V Metaph.*, lect.9, nn.889-897.

² ST. THOMAS, *Contra Gent.*, III, c.86.

sense. This cannot be predicated of God, nor of anything that does exist in so far as it exists. In turn, that which is possible in this sense, may further be possible in two ways. If it exists neither in potency, nor in act, but only in the power of God who can make it because its being implies no contradiction, and because God contains the perfection of all being,¹ we call its possibility objective possibility.² This possibility is predicable of all that God can make. If, however, it is already given in reality, but not yet in act, as a house which can be built, its possibility is called subjective possibility. This subjective possibility, which is often called potentiality, can be either pure potentiality, as prime matter which is the subject of first or substantial act, or the potentiality of a being which is actual in some respects but still in potency for further actualization. Thus, an essence, while actual in the order of essence, is potential in the order of existence.

These various kinds of possibility have sometimes been designated by other terms. We shall employ the terms absolute possibility, objective possibility, and subjective possibility to signify the three types of possibility which we have just explained.

There is still another meaning of the term possible, which St. Thomas explains in the passage that immediately follows the one we have just quoted:

Hoc autem possibile [i.e., the one opposed to the impossible] non est necessarium defendere contra hoc quod effectus ex necessitate causari dicuntur, sed *possibile quod opponitur necessario*, prout dicitur possibile *quod potest esse et non esse*. Non dicitur autem aliquid per hunc modum possibile vel contingens ex hoc solum quod quandoque sit in potentia et quandoque in actu, ut praedicta responsio supponit: nam sic etiam in motibus caelestibus est possibile et contingens; non enim semper est coniunctio vel oppositio solis aut lunae in actu, sed quandoque quidem in actu, quandoque autem in potentia; quae tamen necessaria sunt, cum de his dentur demonstrationes. Sed possibile vel contingens quod opponitur necessario, hoc in sua ratione habet, quod non sit necesse illud fieri quando non est. Quod quidem est quia non de necessitate sequitur ex causa sua. Sic enim dicimus quod Sortem sessurum esse est contingens, ipsum autem esse moriturum est necessarium, quia secundum horum ex causa sua de necessitate sequitur, non autem primum. Si ergo ex motibus caelestibus de necessitate sequitur quod eorum effectus sint quandoque futuri, tollitur possibile et contingens quod necessario opponitur.

Even the incorruptible creatures are sometimes called contingent. Contingent, then, is predicable of everything except God. This meaning of contingent, however, must be distinguished from the one just quoted. It signifies that no creature, whatever necessity it may have,³ is of itself, but is freely created by God as to all that it is. This contingency is called extrinsic, as opposed to the intrinsic contingency of the generable and corruptible, as well as of each and all created agents in so far as by reason of their limitation they may be *causa per accidens*, which is either chance or fortune.

With these distinctions in mind let us now examine the following text from Cusa's work *De Possess.*

¹ ST. THOMAS, *Ia*, q.25, a.3.

² Cf. JOHN OF ST. THOMAS, *Cursus theologicus* (ed. SOLESMES), T.II, d.18, a.1, p.372.

³ Cf. *Contra Gent.*, II, c.30.

Omnis enim creatura, actu existens, utique esse potest; quod enim esse non potest, non est, unde non esse, non est creatura. Si enim est creatura, utique est. Creare etiam, cum sit ex non esse, ad esse producere: utique clare ostendi ipsum non esse, nequaquam creaturam esse, neque hoc parum est apprehendisse. Dico autem consequenter, cum omne existens, possit esse id, quod actu est: hinc actualitatem conspiciamus absolutam, per quam quae actu sunt, id sunt quod sunt. Sicut cum alba videmus, visibili oculo, albedinem intellectualiter intuemur, sine qua album non est album. Cum igitur actualitas sit actu, utique et ipsa esse potest, cum impossibile esse, non sit. Nec potest ipsa absoluta possibilitas, aliud esse a posse, sicut nec absoluta actualitas, aliud ab actu. Nec potest ipsa iam dicta possibilitas, prior esse actualitate: quemadmodum dicimus, aliquem potentiam praecedere actum. Nam quomodo providisset in actum, nisi per actualitatem? Posse enim fieri, si seipsum ad actum produceret, esset actu, antequam actu esset. Possibilitas ergo absoluta, de qua loquimur, per quam ea quae actu sunt, actu esse possunt: non praecedit actualitatem, neque etiam sequitur. Quomodo enim actualitas esse posset, possibilitate non existente? Coaeterna ergo sunt absoluta potentia, et actus, et utriusque nexus. Neque plura sunt aeterna, sed sic sunt aeterna, quod ipsa aeternitas . . . Nominabo autem hanc, quam sic videmus aeternitatem, Deum gloriosum . . .¹

"Omnis enim creatura . . . apprehendisse." According to this text, any creature that actually exists is also possible; for that which cannot be, i.e., that which is impossible, is not. The possibility of which Cusa is speaking is clearly that possibility which is opposed to the impossible. From this he concludes that non-being is not a creature. "... Non esse non est creatura." If non-being were a creature, non-being would be. This is clear from the fact that creation is the production from non-being to being. "Creare etiam, cum sit ex non esse, ad esse producere." For, if the creature is established by creation, that from which it is produced cannot itself be a creature.

"Dico autem . . . aliud ab actu." Since everything that actually exists is possible, i.e., can be that which it actually is, we see in the very possibility, Cusa adds, the absolute actuality by which those things which actually are, are that which they are. Absolute actuality is both "that which" (*quod*) and "that by which" (*quo*), for it is that by which things are, and are that which they are. If we understand Cusa correctly, he seems to distinguish actuality "as that which,"² from actuality "as the act by which actuality is actual."³

Evidently, this refers to what we have called the common, logical notion of being, i.e., being in its most confused generality. For this term alone can be said of anything that is, in whatever way it is, whether it be logical or real, divine or created, *per se* or *per accidens*, etc. Furthermore, this most general notion of being can be both subject and predicate in a proposition. For instance, we say that it is the "most general" notion; we also say that being of reason is being. And thus, it is both "that which" (*quod*) and "that by which" (*quo*).

The same process of thought is indicated by Cusa's conception of absolute possibility, i.e., the possibility which is opposed to the impossible. From the fact that actually existing things may be called possible in this sense, we come to the knowledge of absolute possibility. Here again we

¹ P., p.250.

² "Cum igitur actualitas sit actu, utique et ipsa esse potest . . ."

³ "... Per quam quae actu sunt, id sunt quod sunt."

find the distinction of *quod* and *quo*. The former aspect is designated by the term *possibilitas*: the latter by *posse*. "Nec potest ipsa absoluta possibilitas, aliud esse a posse."

"Nec potest... Deum gloriosum." Having made the distinction between absolute actuality and absolute possibility, Cusa proceeds to show that these two notions are identical and that they constitute the very being of God. Absolute actuality is possible, for if it were impossible, it would not be. "Cum igitur actualitas sit actu, utique et ipsa esse potest, cum impossibile esse, non sit." But that by which anything is possible, is *posse*. Hence absolute actuality is possible by *posse*. Since absolute actuality is an absolute, the *posse* by which it is possible must be absolute *posse*; but absolute *posse* is absolute possibility. "Nec potest ipsa absoluta possibilitas, aliud esse a posse." Hence absolute actuality, being absolute *posse* is absolute possibility. So, too, absolute possibility is absolute actuality. Absolute possibility is possible by absolute *posse*; but that by which anything is that which it is, is *actus*; hence absolute *posse* is *actus*. Since absolute *posse* is an absolute it must be absolute *actus*. If absolute *posse*, which is identical with absolute possibility, is absolute *actus*, which is identical with absolute actuality, it follows that absolute possibility is absolute actuality. Hence absolute actuality is absolute possibility; absolute possibility is absolute actuality. Nor is one without the other. How could absolute actuality be, if it were not possible to be? How could absolute possibility be that which it is, without absolute actuality? Neither precedes the other; neither follows the other. If they neither precede nor follow each other, they must be coeternal; but there cannot be several eternities; hence they are eternity; they are God.

II. CRITIQUE OF THIS DOCTRINE

Obviously, Cusa has confused the absolute being of God with the formally universal notion of being. In so doing he has reduced *esse subsistens*, which is God, to the *esse universale* which is said of all beings. This is precisely the error against which St. Thomas warns us in the *De Ente et Essentia*:¹

Nec oportet si dicimus quod Deus est esse tantum ut in errore eorum incidamus qui Deum dixerunt esse illud esse universale quo quaelibet res formaliter est. Hoc enim esse quod Deus est huius conditionis est quod nulla sibi additio fieri possit. Unde per ipsam suam puritatem est esse distinctum ab omni alio esse, sicut si esset quidem color separatus ex ipsa sua separatione esset aliud a colore non separato. Propter quod in commento nonae propositionis libri de Causis dicitur quod individuatio primae causae quae est esse tantum est per puram bonitatem eius. Esse autem commune sicut in intellectu suo non includit additionem, ita non includit in intellectu suo aliquam praecisionem additionis, quia si hoc esset, nihil posset intelligi esse in quo super esse aliquid adderetur.

Cajetan's commentary on this passage,² too, well applies to Cusa: "Hic excluditur primus quorundam error talis scilicet: Deus est commune

¹ C.5 (ed. ROLAND-GOSSELIN), p.37.—*Contra Gent.*, I, c.26.

² In *De Ente et Essentia*, c.6 (ed. LAURENT), n.108.

esse omnium. Imaginati sunt isti quod cum omnia conveniant in hoc quod habent esse, ipsum esse omnium, quo res formaliter sunt in communi seu in universali sit ipse Deus gloriosus."

Cusa has done just that. From the consideration that all things have being, he derives the notion of absolute or universal being by which all things are. "Cum omne existens, possit esse id, quod actu est: hinc actualitatem conspicimus absolutam, per quam quae actu sunt, id sunt quod sunt." This absolute or universal being is then said to be God. Again, when Cajetan continues: "Moti sunt autem tali ratione: Esse nulla additione specificatum est esse commune; Deus est esse nulla additione specificatum: ergo Deus est esse commune," it would seem as though he were but repeating the very words of Cusa: "Neque quidquam intelligi potest esse sine esse. Absolutum autem esse non potest esse aliud quam maximum absolute. Nihil igitur potest intelligi esse sine maximo."¹

Cajetan then goes on to point out the basic fallacy in this reasoning: Sed peccat ratio illa propter multiplicem majoris intellectum. Dupliciter enim intelligi potest esse a nulla additione specificari. Uno modo secundum rem extra animam subsistendo, alio modo secundum intellectus cogitationem tantum, primo modo major est falsa, minor autem vera; secundo modo major est vera, minor autem falsa: esse namque commune per intellectum in sua abstractione acceptum nullam contractionem includit, secundum vero quod est extra intellectum, sine contractione non invenitur, omne namque esse est contractum ad substantiam vel accidens; esse autem quod est quiditas divina est purum absque omni additione secundum rem et ex ipsa sua puritate secundum rem est distinctum ab aliorum esse, et hoc est nullo modo commune, sicut albedo separata ex hoc ipso quod esset pura albedo esset distincta albedo ab aliis albedinibus cum substantiis mixtis et non esset albedo in communi. Peccat secundo major illa, quia contingit adhuc dupliciter esse nulla additione specificari seu contrahi. Uno modo actu tantum; alio modo actu et potentia. Primo modo major est vera, minor vero falsa. Secundo modo major est falsa, minor autem vera. Esse namque in communi, licet nulla sit additione contractum, est tamen contrahibile, aliter nulla res haberet esse quae aliquid addit supra ipsum esse; et sic homo non haberet esse cum ultra esse habeat humanitatem, quantitatem, etc. Unde esse commune actu tantum specificatione caret; esse vero divinum nullam specificationem habet actu, nec aliquam habere potest et ideo actu et potentia additione caret. Et haec est solutio quam in littera S. Thomas ponit sub aliis verbis, dicens quod omne commune nec includit nec excludit additionem, id est non includit actu, potest tamen habere illam. Esse vero divinum non solum non includit illam, immo excludit, id est, non solum non includit actu immo nec potentia et sic excludit illam: quod enim impossibile est convenire alicui excluditur omnino ab illo. De his diffuse habes in I contra Gentiles (cap. xxvii).

Ignoring this distinction between the two kinds of universal or absolute being, Cusa conceives of God as the universal notion of being. And since no distinction between actuality and possibility is contained explicitly in this common notion of being, he says that God is anterior to the actuality which is distinguished from potency, and anterior to the possibility which is distinguished from act. "...Dico, nunc nobis constare Deum ante actualitatem, quae distinguitur a potentia, et ante possibilitatem, quae distinguitur ab actu, esse ipsum simplex mundi principium."² And since this universal notion of being can be said of all that is, *whether what is be actual or only possible*, Cusa says that God alone is all that which can be. "...Solutus Deus id sit quod esse potest..."³

¹ DI., I, 6, p.14.

² P., p.251.

³ P., p.251.

In further considering his notion of God as all that which can be, i.e., God as all possible being, Cusa continues to exploit this confusion of the various meanings of possibility. "To be all possible being" can be understood in diverse ways. The *esse subsistens*, which is God, may be called all possible being in the sense that God is, actually and necessarily but in an eminent manner, all that implies no contradiction. Further, the phrase "to be all possible being" can designate any one of the generic notions of possibility. Thus, the universal notion of possibility which is opposed to the impossible can be said to be all possible being, in so far as it is predicable of any being. "To be all possible being" might also mean "to be all that which can be produced." So understood, the phrase might be said by reference either to the general notion of objective possibility, or to that of subjective possibility such as the pure potentiality of prime matter. Thus, we say that prime matter is potentially all the beings that can be deduced from it.

Although the whole of *De Possess* is marked with Cusa's confusion regarding the modes in which God, as well as the different kinds of possibility, can be said to be all that is possible, this same confusion can be seen even better in *De Mente*, where he teaches that God is objective possibility, and in *De Docta Ignorantia*, in which he maintains that He is prime matter. Let us first examine the following text from *De Mente*, Chap. 11.

PHILOSOPHUS.—Tetigisti superius de trinitate Dei et trinitate mentis: oro declares, quomodo omnia in Deo sunt in trinitate, similiter et in mente nostra.

IDIOTA.—Vos philosophi asseritis decem genera generalissima omnia complecti.

PHILOSOPHUS.—Ita est perfectio.

IDIOTA.—Nonne dum ea, ut actu sunt, consideras, divisa esse conspicias?

PHILOSOPHUS.—Immo.

IDIOTA.—Sed dum ea ante inchoationem essendi consideras sine divisione, quid tunc aliud esse possunt quam aeternitas? nam ante omnem divisionem connexio. Illa igitur ante omnem divisionem unita et connexa esse necesse est. Connexio autem ante omnem divisionem aeternitas est simplicissima, quae Deus est. Adhuc dico: cum Deus non possit negari perfectus, et perfectum sit, cui nihil deest, hinc rerum universitas est in perfectione, quae Deus est. Sed perfectio summa exigit, quod sit simplex et una absque alteritate et diversitate: hinc omnia in Deo unum.

PHILOSOPHUS.—Aperta et delectabilis ostensio est, quam facis, sed adice: quomodo in trinitate?

IDIOTA.—Alibi de hoc agendum foret, ut clarius dici posset; nunc tamen, quia statui omnia, quae exigis, pro posse adimplere, sic recipito: habes omnia ab aeterno in Deo Deum esse. Considera igitur rerum universitatem in tempore, et cum impossibile non fiat, nonne vides eam ab aeterno fieri potuisse?

PHILOSOPHUS.—Mens assentit.

IDIOTA.—Igitur omnia in posse fieri mentaliter vides.

PHILOSOPHUS.—Recte ais.

IDIOTA.—Et si fieri potuerunt, erat necessario posse facere, antequam essent.

PHILOSOPHUS.—Ita erat.

IDIOTA.—Sic ante rerum universitatem temporalem vides omnia in posse facere.

PHILOSOPHUS.—Video.

IDIOTA.—Nonne, ut in esse prodiret rerum universitas, quam vides oculo mentis in absoluto posse fieri et in absoluto posse facere, necesse erat nexus ipsius utriusque, scilicet posse fieri et posse facere? alias, quod potuit fieri per potentem facere, numquam fuisset factum.

PHILOSOPHUS.—Optime ais.

IDIOTA.—Vides igitur ante omnem rerum temporalem existentiam omnia in nexu procedente de posse fieri absoluto et posse facere absoluto. Sed illa tria absoluta sunt ante omne tempus simplex aeternitas. Hinc omnia conspicias in simplici aeternitate trinititer.

PHILOSOPHUS.—Sufficientissime!

IDIOTA.—Attende igitur, quomodo absolutum posse fieri et absolutum posse facere et absolutus nexus non sunt nisi unum infinite absolutum et una deitas. Et ordine prius est posse fieri quam posse facere. Nam omne facere praesupponit fieri posse, et posse facere id, quod habet, scilicet posse facere, habet de posse fieri. Et de utroque nexus. Unde cum ordo dicat posse fieri praecedere, sibi attribuitur unitas, cui inest praecedere, et posse facere attribuitur aequalitas unitatem praesupponens, a quibus nexus. Et haec nunc, si placet, de hoc sufficiant.

“Tetigisti . . . hinc omnia in Deo unum.” According to Cusa, then, the predicaments comprise all created beings. As these predicaments are now, in the creatures, they are divided one from the other; e.g., quantity and quality are different. But, says Cusa, if we consider the predicaments as they were before the beginning of created existence, that is, as they were one and undivided, what else can they be but eternity? “Sed dum ea ante inchoationem essendi consideras sine divisione, quid tunc aliud esse possunt quam aeternitas?” For eternity is that which precedes all divisions. Being eternity, they are God. “. . . Hinc rerum universitas est in perfectione, quae Deus est.” As God, they cannot be a many; they cannot be distinct one from the other; they can only be absolute unity. “. . . Hinc omnia in Deo unum.”

“Aperta . . . de hoc sufficiant.” Since God is a unity which is a trinity, the predicaments, as they are in God, are a trinity. How to show this trinity? First, all the creatures which now actually exist in time, are possible, for what is impossible, is not. Hence from all eternity they were able to be made. From all eternity there has been the possibility to be made, i.e., absolute *posse fieri*. “Igitur omnia in posse fieri mentaliter vides.” If, from eternity, the creatures have been able to be made, the possibility to make them must have been eternal. “Sic ante rerum universitatem temporalem vides omnia in posse facere.” From eternity, then, there have been absolute *posse fieri* and absolute *posse facere*. For the totality of creatures, which has existed in *posse fieri* and *posse facere* from eternity, to come into being in time, it was necessary that there should be a union of *posse fieri* and *posse facere*. Unless there were a union between that which can be made, and that which can make, nothing would be made. Thus, says Cusa, before the temporal existence of all things, there was an absolute union, absolute *nexus*, proceeding from *posse fieri* and *posse facere*. “Vides igitur ante omnem rerum temporalem existentiam omnia in nexu procedente de posse fieri absoluto et posse facere absoluto.”

Seeing that these three — absolute *posse fieri*, absolute *posse facere*, and absolute *nexus* — were before all time, they are simple eternity. “Hinc omnia conspicias in simplici aeternitate triniter.” Hence absolute *posse fieri*, i.e., all things that can be made; absolute *posse facere*, i.e., that which can make all things; and the absolute union of the two, are one infinite absolute. They are *Deitas*. “Attende igitur, quomodo absolutum posse fieri et absolutum posse facere et absolutus nexus non sunt nisi unum infinite absolutum et una deitas.” Although they are all eternal, according to the order of nature absolute *posse fieri* is first, “Et ordine prius est posse fieri quam posse facere.” For absolute *posse facere* presupposes absolute *posse fieri*, that is, the possibility to make all things presupposes that all things can be made. Hence, according to the order of nature there is first absolute

posse fieri, then absolute *posse facere*, and thirdly, the union of the two. Absolute *posse fieri*, absolute *posse facere*, and their union, are God, one and triune.

Cusa's first error here consists in his misunderstanding of the mode in which the predicaments are present in God. According to the Thomists, the predicaments are the supreme genera of created being; hence they properly signify the mixed perfections. In their proper formalities, the simple perfections are not predicamental being, for of themselves they have nothing of the imperfection of created being. They become predicamental being only when limited by created subjects which cannot possess them according to the totality of their proper perfections. Because the predicaments, in their very *rationes*, denote the imperfection of created being, they are not in God formally, but virtually. Cusa, on the contrary, not only teaches that the predicaments are formally in God, he says that they are *Deitas*, i.e., the proper formality of God. He seems to think that in themselves the predicaments bespeak only perfection; that any imperfection said of them rises from their presence in the creatures. This is to confuse the predicamental perfections with the simple perfections. The predicaments properly signify the various genera and species of created being; but the genera and species, by their very formality of being genera and species, signify limitation and imperfection. To conceive of the predicaments without imperfection is to conceive of them apart from their formality of being genera and species. To do this is to destroy the very formality of predicamental being, for it means attempting to conceive of a formality apart from that which essentially constitutes it as a formality.¹ Yet this is precisely what Cusa has done — to the detriment of both God and the creature.

From the presence in God of the predicaments, i.e., of all creatures, Cusa goes on to show that God is objective possibility. His argument — founded on a misconception of the attribute of divine omnipotence — seems to be the following. Omnipotence, absolute *posse facere*, is a divine attribute; and since the attributes of God are identical with God, God's essence is the absolute power to make all things. But the power to make

¹ JOHN OF ST. THOMAS explains this as follows: "Quia perfectiones quae sunt in certo genere, ex suo quidditativo conceptu et formali spectant ad illud genus, ut animal, equus, lapis, etc.; quod patet manifeste, quia praedicata generica et differentialia quibus contrahuntur, et ex quibus constituitur species, sunt illi essentialia: quia genus et differentia essentialiter constituunt speciem, quae ponitur in praedicamento; ergo perfectio specifica et generica, intrinsece et essentialiter importat perfectionem sic limitatam, quod ex vi sui conceptus includit imperfectionem quae ingreditur essentialem eius conceptum. Si autem abstrahatur et purificetur ab illa ratione imperfectionis et limitationis, purificatur ab eo quod est sibi essenziale ex vi formalis sui conceptus, in eo in quo distinguitur a perfectione simpliciter simplici, et destruitur ipsa essentialis ratio talis perfectionis praedicamentalis: quia de essentiali conceptu illius est perfectio generica seu determinati generis. Sed non potest formaliter esse in Deo, nisi destruaturs illa ratio generica et limitata; ergo nisi destruaturs essentialis illa ratio, non ponitur in Deo. Nam vel illa purificatio et denudatio ab imperfectione est talis quod relinquit illam perfectionem extra omne genus et praedicamentum: vel non. Si non relinquit: ergo prout sic non ponitur in Deo, cui repugnat omnis ratio generica et praedicamentalis. Si relinquit extra praedicamentum: destruit essentialem eius rationem, quia essentialiter constat ex praedicatis genericis et praedicamentibus, cum constituatur essentialiter ex genere et differentia."— *Curs. theol.*, T.I, d.5, a.2, p.507.

all things presupposes that all things can be made. Hence, the creatures as possible are presupposed to divine omnipotence. If omnipotence is eternal and divine, that which is presupposed to it must also be eternal and divine. Likewise, the union between that which can make and that which can be made must be eternal and divine. But, in God, all is absolute unity; hence the power to make all creatures, the creatures that can be made, and the union of the two, are God, one and triune.

By reasoning in this fashion, Cusa destroys both the essence of God and the trinity of the Persons; but for the moment we are concerned only with his conception of God as objective possibility. His error, as we have said, is based upon a false conception of the attribute of omnipotence. For, in truth, omnipotence can be considered either formally or radically. Considered formally, it is an attribute of God and hence rationally distinct from the divine essence.¹ Since omnipotence, as an attribute, is the power of God to make that which is possible absolutely, i.e., objectively possible, in that it does not involve contradiction and can, therefore, have the nature of being, there is an order between the attribute and its object. In other words, God is omnipotent, not because He can make all the things that are possible to His power, but because He can make all things that are possible absolutely.

*Possibile autem dicitur dupliciter, secundum Philosophum, in V Metaphys. Uno modo, per respectum ad aliquam potentiam: sicut quod subditur humanae potentiae, dicitur esse possibile homini. Non autem potest dici quod Deus dicatur omnipotens, quia potest omnia quae sunt possibilis naturae creatae: quia divina potentia in plura extenditur. Si autem dicatur quod Deus sit omnipotens, quia potest omnia quae sunt possibilis suae potentiae, erit circulatio in manifestatione omnipotentiae: hoc enim non erit aliud quam dicere quod Deus est omnipotens, quia potest omnia quae potest. Relinquitur igitur quod Deus dicatur omnipotens, quia potest omnia possibilis absolute, quod est alter modus dicendi possibile. Dicitur autem aliquid possibile vel impossibile absolute, ex habitudine terminorum: possibile quidem, quia praedicatum non repugnat subiecto, ut Socratem sedere; impossibile vero absolute, quia praedicatum repugnat subiecto, ut hominem esse asinum.*²

But omnipotence can also be considered radically, that is, as it is the divine essence. Considered in this manner, omnipotence does not presuppose the possibility of the creature; on the contrary, the creature, even as to its objective possibility, necessarily depends upon the divine essence. For the divine essence contains the perfection of the whole of being, and therefore it contains within its eminence the creature as possible being. Hence the possibility of the creature, — the fact that the creature can have the nature of being, and therefore can be made —, follows from the superabundance of the divine essence, that is from omnipotence understood radically. This is what St. Thomas refers to in the passage following the one we have just quoted:

Est autem considerandum quod, cum unumquodque agens agat sibi simile, unicuique potentiae activae correspondet possibile ut obiectum proprium, secundum rationem illius actus in quo fundatur potentia activa: sicut potentia calefactiva refertur, ut ad proprium obiectum, ad esse calefactibile. Esse autem divinum, super quod ratio divinae potentiae fundatur, est esse infinitum, non limitatum ad aliquod genus

¹ We refer to the distinction which JOHN OF ST. THOMAS terms: "Distinctio rationis ratiocinatae non secundum totalem praecisionem sed secundum explicitum et implicitum."—*Curs. theol.*, T.I, d.4, a.6, pp.483-485.

² ST. THOMAS, *Ia*, q.25, a.3, c.

entis, sed prae habens in se totius esse perfectionem. Unde quidquid potest habere rationem entis, continetur sub possibilibus absolutis, respectu quorum Deus dicitur omnipotens.

John of St. Thomas brings out the full meaning of this text:

Ubi aperte loquitur D. Thomas de eo quod se habet antecederet ad conceptum omnipotentiae, ut attributum est: quia loquitur de esse divino super quod fundatur ratio divinae potentiae; essentia autem, ut fundans divinam potentiam, non est attributum potentiae, sed antecederet se habens, utpote fundamentum potentiae, et radicaliter potentia, non formaliter. Et quia hoc esse divinum continet seu prae-habet in se perfectionem totius esse, quidquid potest habere rationem entis, habet possibilitatem absolutam. Quae causalis necessariam consequentiam importat: nam si ex hoc continetur aliquid sub ratione possibilis, quia essentia Dei prae-habet in se perfectionem totius esse, manifeste sequitur ipsa possibilitas seu ratio entis possibilis necessario ex illa continentia Dei: quia haec, ante omnem liberam actionem, continet omnem perfectionem entis.¹

More proximately, however, the objective possibility of a creature follows from God's knowledge of His essence. A creature is objectively possible in that, its notes being compatible, it has the notion of being and therefore can be produced by divine omnipotence. But the determined notes which form the essential predicates of the creature's essence arise from God's knowing His essence as imitable by creatures. Hence the determined being of the creatures is established by God's knowing His essence as imitable in one way by this creature, and in another way by that. Hence, the creature as possible depends, fundamentally upon the divine essence, and formally upon God's knowledge of the divine essence.

... Plures ideae sunt in mente divina ut intellectae ab ipso. Quod hoc modo potest videri. Ipse enim essentiam suam perfecte cognoscit: unde cognoscit eam secundum omnem modum quo cognoscibilis est. Potest autem cognosci non solum secundum quod in se est, sed secundum quod est participabilis secundum aliquem modum similitudinis a creaturis. Unaquaeque autem creatura habet propriam speciem, secundum quod aliquo modo participat divinae essentiae similitudinem. Sic igitur in quantum Deus cognoscit suam essentiam ut sic imitabilem a tali creatura, cognoscit eam ut propriam rationem et ideam huius creaturae. Et similiter de aliis...²

Not distinguishing between the mode in which the creature as possible precedes the attribute of omnipotence and that in which it follows from the divine essence and divine knowledge, and considering only the first mode, Cusa imagines that the creature as possible must be divinity itself, seeing that it precedes omnipotence. In such a conception, the essence of God formally as such becomes the creature as possible; God becomes absolute *posse fieri*, objective possibility — that which can be produced by God.

¹ *Curs. theol.*, T.III, d.31, a.1, p.580.

² *Ia*, q.15, a.2, c. In this connection, JOHN OF ST. THOMAS says: "Est autem idea divina summa et prima regula totius veritatis creatae. Ergo per hoc res red-duntur absolute possibiles: quia id quod excogitat Deus et format, ut imitabile a se, est quod unicuique rei congruum et conveniens est, nec sibi repugnans; ergo est possibile, quia illud est possibile rei quod non est repugnans illi. Antecederet autem ad ideas divinas, nihil intelligitur ut determinate et distincte formabile, nec rebus distributa sua praedicata quae eis sint debita vel convenientia; hoc enim fit a Deo artificioso et intelligibiliter, non naturaliter: quia fit eo modo quo res ipsae formabiles sunt a Deo, solum autem per artem formabiles sunt. Antecederet vero ad artem et intellectum divinum, solum radicaliter intelliguntur formabiles et possibiles, quatenus scilicet in infinito esse Dei omnis ratio entis et perfectio radicaliter intelligitur esse contenta: ad ejus enim essentiae participationem res sunt factibiles.

Neque ad hoc, ut res dicantur formabiles et ideatae, ac contentae in virtute idearum tamquam in regula et mensura eorum quae sibi convenire possunt, requiritur aliqua causalitas per modum actionis transeuntis: sed sufficit ipsa formatio rerum in mente divina per modum actus immanentis, per quem res dicuntur formatae et contentae in virtute idearum divinarum."—*Curs. theol.*, T.III, d.31, a.1, nn.15-16, p.582.

Let us now examine *De Docta Ignorantia*, II, 7-8, wherein Cusa identifies *esse subsistens* with prime matter. In Chapter VII, Cusa teaches that the essence of every creature is substantially composed of a material and a formal cause. These two causes are sometimes called possibility and actuality; or potency and act; or again, matter and form. Why, he would ask, does every created essence have a material cause as an intrinsic component? His answer is that any creature which is must have been able to be; for if it had not been able to be, it would not actually be. Hence, the possibility to be precedes all; it is, therefore, the intrinsic material component of every created essence. Confusing the possibility opposed to the impossible with the subjective possibility of prime matter, Cusa maintains that every created essence *qua* essence is substantially composed of matter and form; or, as he sometimes says, of possibility and actuality, or potency and act. We shall examine these points later on; for the present they concern us solely in relation to Cusa's notion of God as all things possible.

In Chapter VIII Cusa proposes to make a more detailed study of this material cause found in each creature. The Chapter is entitled: *De possibilitate sive materia universi*; the term *universum* means all creatures. "Universum vero cum omnia complectatur quae Deus non sunt..."¹

In the first section of this Chapter, Cusa gives what is purported to be a résumé of the teachings of the early philosophers, especially of Plato and Aristotle, concerning the ultimate material cause. It is obvious that in imagining that all these philosophers, Plato and Aristotle included, postulated a material cause in the essence of every creature, he has completely misunderstood their opinions. After this initial error, he states that this material cause is the possibility involved in becoming. "...Omnium sententia fuit ex nihilo nihil fieri..." The ancients, he says, called this material cause "absolute possibility" or "matter." "De qua multa quidem per veteres dicta sunt, quorum omnium sententia fuit ex nihilo nihil fieri; et ideo quandam absolutam omnia essendi possibilitatem et illam aeternam affirmarunt, in qua omnia possibiliter complicata credebant. Quam quidem materiam seu possibilitatem..."²

When he describes this absolute possibility, Cusa employs terms reminiscent of those used by Aristotle³ and St. Augustine⁴ when treating of matter. For, he says, "...Nec est aliquid nec nihil, neque una neque plures, neque hoc neque illud, neque quid neque quale, sed possibilitas ad omnia, et nihil omnium actu..."⁵

Cusa summarizes the content of this section as follows. According to these men, all things had possible existence in absolute possibility; this absolute possibility was held to be infinite, both because it lacked all form, and because it had an aptitude for all form; this infinity of absolute possibility was considered to be the contrary of the infinity said of God, for

¹ DI., II, 1, p.64.

² DI, II, 8, p.85.

³ *Metaph.*, VII, chap.3, 1029a20.

⁴ *Confess.*, XII, chap.6.

⁵ DI, II, 8, p.85.

the former was infinite because it lacked all form, whereas God was considered to be infinite because He is all form. This, Cusa says, was their teaching on absolute possibility.

Sic in possibilitate absoluta universitatem rerum possibiliter dixerunt. Et est ipsa possibilitas absoluta interminata et infinita propter carentiam formae et aptitudinem ad omnes, ut possibilitas figurandi ceram in leonis aut leporis figuram aut alterius cuiuscumque interminata est. Et ista infinitas contraria est infinitati Dei, quia ista est propter carentiam, Dei vero propter habundantiam, quoniam omnia in ipso ipse actu. Ita infinitas materiae est privativa, Dei negativa. Haec est positio eorum, qui de possibilitate absoluta locuti sunt.¹

From what we have seen of this so-called résumé of the teaching of the ancients, it is clear that it comprises the following:

1. All creatures have a material cause from which they proceed.
2. This material cause, in the abstract, is called absolute possibility.
3. In relation to the things which can come from it, it is defined as:
 - a. *absoluta omnia essendi possibilitas.*
 - b. *aptitudo ad omnia.*
 - c. *possibilitas ad omnia.*

4. Viewed "in itself," it is defined in terms which should apply only to prime matter, i.e., *nec est aliquid nec est nihil, etc.*

In the next section of the Chapter here referred to, Cusa criticises this "opinion" of the ancients. Absolute possibility, declares Cusa, is the least of all possibilities, for it is almost nothing, as even the early philosophers maintained. "...Possibilitas absoluta... est propinquissime circa non-esse (secundum etiam positionem auctorum)..."² Note that by the term absolute possibility, Cusa must understand prime matter, for the phrase *propinquissime ad non-esse* is, obviously, a condensation of the definition he has already given of prime matter: "Quae nec est aliquid nec est nihil," etc. Hence, when Cusa says that absolute possibility is the least of all possibilities, he must mean that it is least in this sense — that of itself it has no actuality. He then continues: if absolute possibility is the least of all possibilities, it is the minimum, and cannot, therefore, be found in the created order. It can only be God. There cannot, then, be anything in the created order *from which* all things come. While more things can come from one thing than from another, there cannot be, in the created order, an absolute possibility from which all things come. This absolute possibility must be God.

... Reperimus impossibile fore possibilitatem absolutam esse. Nam cum inter possibilita nihil minus esse possit quam possibilitas absoluta, quae est propinquissime circa non-esse (secundum etiam positionem auctorum), hinc ad minimum deveniretur atque ad maximum in recipientibus magis et minus, quod est impossibile. Quare possibilitas absoluta in Deo est Deus, extra ipsum vero non est possibilis; numquam enim est dabile aliquid, quod sit in potentia absoluta, cum omnia praeter primum necessario sint contracta. Si enim reperiuntur diversa in mundo ita se habentia, quod ex uno possunt plura esse quam ex alio, ad maximum et minimum simpliciter et absolute non deveniunt; sed quia ista reperiuntur, patet absolutam possibilitatem non esse dabilem.³

¹ DI, II, 8, p.87.

² DI, II, 8, p.87.

³ DI, II, 8, p.87.

This entire Chapter is concerned with the material cause from which, so it is supposed, all the creatures come. The very title of the Chapter, the texts we have quoted, especially the one containing Cusa's criticism of the "opinion" of the ancients, express this clearly. And yet it is a bit startling to learn that Cusa teaches that God is the material cause from which all the creatures proceed. Startling as it may seem, he has been forced to adopt such a position by the very logic of his principles.

The pivotal point of his doctrine, then, is the thesis that all creatures have a material principle from which they proceed. In the abstract, this is a principle which can become all creatures; or, in relation to its most noble form, it is that which can become the greatest possible creature. But Cusa has already conceived God as the greatest possible creature by envisaging Him as the maximum of the creatures. Hence, if the material principle from which all creatures come were in the created order, there would be a real potency on the part of the creatures to become God. This, on the other hand, he could never admit. Once he has made the mistake of attributing a material principle to every creature, Cusa is forced to maintain that this material principle can only be something divine.

Briefly, Cusa confuses the possibility opposed to the impossible with the possibility of that which can be produced; this, in turn, he confuses with the possibility to be produced from a real subject; and finally, he identifies this subject with the *esse subsistens* of God.

CHAPTER FOUR

I. CUSA'S EXPLANATION OF THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GOD AND THE CREATURE

In its attempt to reduce the number of its cognitive media, reason tends to regard the variable and the limit as one in form, so that all difference between them would appear to be only material.¹ Reifying, as it were, this mere process of reason, Cusa conceives God as the real maximum and minimum of every order, compared with which creatures are but more or less. He envisages all reality, God and the creatures, as absolutely and univocally one in form, so that by strict consequence he also considers all difference between God and the creatures as outside the order of form or essence. Thus, as we have already noted, according to Cusa the difference arises from the fact that God is a form predicated of all reality in the "pure" or subsistent state, whereas creatures are this same form as it is received in a subject. Hence the question: what is this subject, which alone differentiates the creatures from God?

Cusa maintains that there is no positive cause for the differences between God and the creatures: that these differences exist only *contingenter*. For God is without envy; He would communicate His own being

¹ Cf. LALOR, *op. cit.*, p.137.

to creatures and make the creatures' being in the full likeness of Himself if that were possible. God, he holds, causes only perfection in the creatures; the imperfections which are in them are not caused by Him, nor by any other positive cause; they are only *contingenter*.

Quoniam autem ipsum maximum procul est ab omni invidia, non potest esse diminutum ut tale communicare. Non habet igitur creatura, quae ab esse est, omne id quod est: corruptibilitatem, divisibilitatem, imperfectionem et cetera huiusmodi a maximo aeterno, indivisibili, perfectissimo, indistincto, uno, neque ab aliqua causa positiva. Sicut enim linea infinita est rectitudo infinita, quae est causa omnis esse linealis, linea vero curva, in hoc quod linea, ab infinita est, in hoc quod curva, non ab infinita est, sed curvitas sequitur finitatem, quoniam ex eo curva, quia non maxima—si enim maxima esset, curva non esset, ut superius est ostensum—: ita quidem contingit rebus, quoniam maximum esse non possunt, ut sint diminuta, altera, distincta et cetera huiusmodi, quae quidem causam non habent. Habet igitur creatura a Deo, ut sit una, discreta et connexa universo et, quanto magis una, tanto Deo similior. Quod autem eius unitas sit in pluralitate, discretio in confusione et connexio in discordantia, a Deo non habet neque ab aliqua causa positiva, sed *contingenter*.¹

This conception of the finiteness of the creature and of its distinction and difference from God, of its imperfections as being not from God but merely *contingenter*, is expressed by Cusa on repeated occasions.

Cum igitur Deus absque diversitate et invidia communicet et recipiatur, ita quod aliter et alterius contingentia recipi non sinat...²

Quis est igitur, qui intelligere queat, quomodo diversimode una infinita forma participetur in diversis creaturis, cum creaturae esse non possit aliud esse quam ipsa resplendentia, non in aliquo positive recepta, sed *contingenter* diversa?³

But what does Cusa mean by the term *contingenter*? To understand this, we must consider his doctrine of the creature as a contraction of God. Being a more or less of God who is the maximum and minimum, the creature is a limitation, a participation, or a contraction of God. Whereas God is absolute unity, the creature is only contracted unity. The stone of the sensible world is contracted stone, whereas God is absolute stone—just as He is the absolute sun or moon. In a word, the basic note of the creature is that it is a more or less of the maximum or minimum, or a contraction of the absolute.

Contraction, says Cusa, comprises three notions: that which is contracted (*contrahibile*); that which contracts (*contrahens*); and the union or composition of the two (*nexus*).

Non potest enim contractio esse sine contrahibili, contrahente et nexu, qui per communem actum utriusque perficitur... Quae potentia, actus et nexus dici possunt.⁴ Est deinde nexus contrahentis et contrahibilis sive materiae et formae aut possibilitatis et necessitatis complexionis, qui actu perficitur quasi quodam spiritu amoris motu quodam illa unientis. Et hic nexus determinata possibilitas a quibusdam nominari consuevit, quoniam posse esse ad actu esse hoc vel illud determinatur ex unione ipsius determinantis formae et determinabilis materiae.⁵

ΙΔΙΟΤΑ.—Nonne, ut in esse prodiret rerum universitas, quam vides oculo mentis in absoluto posse fieri et in absoluto posse facere, necesse erat nexus ipsius utriusque, scilicet posse fieri et posse facere? alias, quod potuit fieri per potentem facere, numquam fuisset factum.

PHILOSOPHUS.—Optime ais.

¹ DI., II, 2, p.65.

² DI., II, 2, p.68.

³ DI., II, 2, p.67.

⁴ DI., II, 7, p.82.

⁵ DI., II, 7, p.83.

IDIOTA.—Vides igitur ante omnem rerum temporalem existentiam omnia in nexu procedente de posse fieri absoluto et posse facere absoluto. Sed illa tria absoluta sunt ante omne tempus simplex aeternitas. Hinc omnia conspicias in simplici aeternitate triniter.

PHILOSOPHUS.—Sufficientissime!

IDIOTA.—Attende igitur, quomodo absolutum posse fieri et absolutum posse facere et absolutus nexus non sunt nisi unum infinite absolutum et una deitas. Et ordine prius est posse fieri quam posse facere. Nam omne facere praesupponit fieri posse, et posse facere id, quod habet, scilicet posse facere, habet de posse fieri. Et de utroque nexus. Unde cum ordo dicat posse fieri praecedere, sibi attribuitur unitas, cui inest praecedere, et posse facere attribuitur aequalitas unitatem praesupponens, a quibus nexus.¹

The contractible is called possibility, potency, *posse esse*, and matter; that which contracts is actuality, act, *actu esse*, and form.²

Contraction, then, is the basic note of a creature. But fundamental to this note is that of contractibility — the abstract notion of *contrahibile*, which signifies the very possibility of a creature. How could a creature be, if it had not been able to be? Moreover, Cusa adds, contractibility bespeaks changeableness and otherness: the essential characteristics of every creature. (Note, here again, Cusa's confusion of the possibility opposed to the impossible with the subjective possibility of prime matter.) *Contrahibilitas* vero dicit quendam possibilitatem et illa ab unitate gignente in divinis descendit, sicut alteritas ab unitate. Dicit enim mutabilitatem et alteritatem, cum in consideratione principii. Nihil enim praecedere videtur posse. Quomodo enim quid esset, si non potuisset esse? Possibilitas igitur ab aeterna unitate descendit.³

Since the creature is a contraction, the contractibility, possibility, or potency — which is one of the constituents of the creature — must also be contracted. As we have seen, God alone is absolute possibility, since He is all things that can be. A creature, on the contrary, is only a contracted possibility, for it cannot be all things; rather every creature is a limited, restricted, or contracted being. "... Possibilitas absoluta in Deo est Deus, extra ipsum vero non est possibilis: numquam enim est dabile aliquid, quod sit in potentia absoluta, cum omnia praeter primum necessario sint contracta."⁴

But if the possibility or potency of a creature is limited and contracted, what contracts it? The possibility is contracted, says Cusa, by the second constituent element in the creature, the act or the *contrahens*. "... Omnis igitur possibilitas contracta est; per actum autem contrahitur."⁵ Just as the possibility or potency in the creature is contracted and limited, the act, too, is contracted or limited. For, also in the order of act, God alone is the absolute. Hence the act in each creature is a contracted act. This contraction of the act in the creature comes from the possibility or potency. "Quare contrahitur actus per possibilitatem..."⁶

Creatures, then, are contracted beings; their possibility or potency is contracted by their act, and the act by the potency. And it is this act,

¹ M., II, p.94.

² Cf. DI., II, 7-8.

³ DI., II, 7, p.82.

⁴ DI., II, 8, p.88.

⁵ DI., II, 8, p.88.

⁶ DI., II, 8, p.88.

which is part of the creature, that is caused by God: "Contractio autem possibilitatis ex actu est, actus autem ab ipso maximo actu est."¹ But the possibility or potency cannot be caused by God, since He causes only act. "Deus enim, cum sit actus infinitus, non est nisi causa actus."² Now, if God is not the cause of the possibility or potency in the creature, whence does it come? Cusa says that it is *contingenter*. "... Possibilitas essendi est contingenter."³ Hence, he adds, the contraction of possibility has a reasonable and necessary cause, for it comes from the act which is caused by God. But the contraction of the act in the creature, its finiteness and imperfection, have no reasonable and necessary cause, since they are due to that possibility which is only *contingenter*.

Contractio autem possibilitatis ex actu est, actus autem ab ipso maximo actu est. Quare, cum contractio possibilitatis sit ex Deo et contractio actus ex contingenti, hinc mundus necessario contractus ex contingenti finitus est. Unde ex notitia possibilitatis videmus, quomodo maximitas contracta evenit ex possibilitati necessario contracta; quae quidem contractio non est ex contingenti, quia per actum. Et ita universum rationabilem et necessariam causam contractionis habet, ut mundus, qui non est nisi esse contractum, non sit contingenter a Deo, qui est maximitas absoluta.⁴

Since God is the absolute in unity, in being, etc., whereas the creature is only a contraction, the latter cannot be said to be, to be one, to be simple, etc. Yet neither can it be said to be the opposite of these perfections; or, to put it in another way, it is not nothing, since it descends from being; it is not plurality, for it descends from unity. Nor can we, according to Cusa, say that a creature is composed of both the perfection and of its opposite, e.g., of being and non-being. Briefly, the creature is both from absolute necessity, i.e., from God, and from contingency; its unity is *contingenter* in plurality; its simplicity is *contingenter* in composition.

Quis igitur copulando simul in creatura necessitatem absolutam, a qua est, et contingentiam, sine qua non est, potest intelligere esse eius? Nam videtur, quod ipsa creatura, quae nec est Deus nec nihil, sit quasi post Deum et ante nihil, intra Deum et nihil, ut ait unus sapientum: "Deus est oppositio nihil mediatione entis." Nec tamen potest esse ab esse et non esse composita. Videtur igitur neque esse, per hoc quod descendit de esse; neque non esse, quia est ante nihil; neque compositum ex illis. Noster autem intellectus, qui nequit transilire contradictoria, divisive aut compositive esse creaturae non attingit, quamvis sciat eius esse non esse nisi ab esse maximi. Non est igitur ab esse intelligibile, postquam esse, a quo, non est intelligibile... Et igitur non potest creatura ut creatura dici una, quia descendit ab unitate; neque plures, quia ejus esse est ab uno; neque ambo copulative. Sed est unitas eius in quadam pluralitate contingenter. Ita de simplicitate et compositione et reliquis oppositis pariformiter dicendum videtur.⁵

Creatures, then, in the doctrine of Cusa, are composed of potency, act, and the nexus of the two. The act has a positive cause: all that is actual in the creature comes from God. But this actuality is only a limited and contracted one, for although God is absolutely good and without envy, He cannot be received in another as He is in Himself. "Et licet se omnibus communicet liberalissime, cum sit infinite bona, tamen a nullo capi potest,

¹ DI., II, 8, p.89.

² DI., II, 8, p.88.

³ DI., II, 8, p.88.

⁴ DI., II, 8, p.89.

⁵ DI., II, 2, p.66.

uti est. Identitas enim infinita non potest in alio recipi, cum in alio aliter recipiatur."¹ But if God, Who is the essence of all things, cannot be received by the creatures with the perfection He has in Himself, He is received with such perfection as the subject will allow. "Et cum non possit in aliquo nisi aliter recipi, tunc recipitur meliori modo quo potest."² Hence it is the subject that receives God — the subject of the act: the potency — which limits and contracts the creature. This subject is not caused by God, nor by any other positive cause; it is only *contingenter*. Since the differences between God and the creature are only *contingenter*, we can say, Cusa teaches, that a creature is *Deus occasionatus*. "Quis ista intelligere posset, quomodo omnia illius unice infinitae formae sunt imago, diversitatem ex contingenti habendo, quasi creatura sit Deus occasionatus..."³

II. CRITIQUE OF THIS DOCTRINE

In his study of the nature of the creature, Cusa once more displays his confusion of the various kinds of possibility. Because an actually existing creature can be called possible in the sense that it is not impossible, it appears to him that every created essence is intrinsically and substantially constituted from a union of potency and act, or matter and form. He identifies the possibility which is opposed to the impossible with the subjective possibility of prime matter. The argument by which he shows that potentiality is an intrinsic constituent of the created essence offers ample evidence of this confusion. The text we have in mind, and which we have already quoted, is the following:

Contrahibilitas vero dicit quandam possibilitatem, et illa ab unitate gignente in divinis descendit, sicut alteritas ab unitate. Dicit enim mutabilitatem et alteritatem, cum in consideratione principii. Nihil enim praecedere videtur posse. Quomodo enim quid esset, si non potuisset esse?⁴

"Contrahibilitas vero dicit quandam possibilitatem." But which possibility? Cusa's query: "Quomodo enim quid esset, si non potuisset esse?," clearly indicates that the possibility he means is that which is opposed to the impossible. But this possibility can be said of the entire creature, i.e., of the union of potency and act, in so far as this union involves no contradiction. Yet he considers contractibility as only one of the essential constituents of the creature, for the determination of contractibility comes from the act which is the other constituent of the same creature. Now, the possibility said of the whole creature becomes, in turn, an intrinsic part of the creature. In other words, he considers the possibility which is opposed to the impossible as a real intrinsic constituent of the creature.

This same confusion is referred to by St. Thomas in the following objection taken from *Ia*, q.46, a.1:

AD PRIMUM SIC PROCEDITUR. Videtur quod universitas creaturarum, quae mundi nomine nuncupatur, non incoeperit, sed fuerit ab aeterno. Omne enim quod incoepit

¹ S., I, p.22.

² S., I, p.22.

³ DI., II, 2, p.68.

⁴ DI., II, 7, p.82.

esse, antequam fuerit, possibile fuit ipsum esse: alioquin impossibile fuisset ipsum fieri. Si ergo mundus incoepit esse, antequam inciperet, possibile fuit ipsum esse. Sed quod possibile est esse, est materia, quae est in potentia ad esse, quod est per formam, et ad non esse, quod est per privationem. Si ergo mundus incoepit esse, antequam mundum fuit materia. Sed non potest esse materia sine forma: materia autem mundi cum forma, est mundus. Fuit ergo mundus antequam esse inciperet: quod est impossibile.

The reply of St. Thomas shows that the objection is based upon a confusion of the different meanings of the term "possible."

AD PRIMUM ERGO DICENDUM quod, antequam mundus esset, possibile fuit mundum esse, non quidem secundum potentiam passivam, quae est materia; sed secundum potentiam activam Dei. Et etiam secundum quod dicitur aliquid absolute possibile, non secundum aliquam potentiam, sed ex sola habitudine terminorum, qui sibi non repugnant; secundum quod possibile opponitur *impossibili*, ut patet per Philosophum, in V *Metaphys.*

The same error occurs in other texts of Cusa. Thus, in *De Possesse* we read:

Recte ais: nam sine potentia, et actu, atque utriusque nexu, non est, nec esse potest quicquam. Si enim aliquid horum deficeret, non esset. Quomodo enim esset, si esse non posset, et quomodo esset, si actu non esset, cum esse sit actus, et si posset esse, et non esset, quomodo esset. Oportet igitur utriusque nexum esse, et posse esse, et actu esse, et nexus: non sunt alia et alia, sunt enim eiusdem essentiae, cum non faciant nisi unum et idem.¹

How does he prove that potency and act are the constituents of every creature? Potency is an intrinsic constituent of the essence, for how could a creature be if it were not able to be? Act, too, is an intrinsic component, for how could a creature be if it were not actually? Potency and act, then, are the intrinsic constituents of every created essence.

In other texts, too, from the fact that the creature can be produced by God, Cusa argues to the presence of subjective possibility understood as prime matter. Here, he confuses the *posse fieri* of objective possibility with the *posse fieri* of the subjective possibility of prime matter. "In omnibus igitur, quae principiata sunt, posse fieri... posse facere... et compositionem utriusque... reperire necesse est."² "To be produced by God" thus becomes identical with "to be educed from matter"; and since "to be educed from matter" means that matter is an intrinsic constituent of the creature, Cusa attributes matter to each creature, as one of the components of its essence.

In relation to the creature, he has taken as one and indistinct three kinds of possibility: the one opposed to the impossible, the possibility we called objective, and the subjective possibility of prime matter. But he lapses into an even more disastrous error when he identifies subjective possibility with privation. The better to understand the gravity of this error, let us first recall the salient points of St. Thomas's doctrine concerning privation.

Whereas negation simply denotes an absence of perfection, privation signifies the absence of perfection in a subject. "... Negation means just the absence of the thing in question, while in privation there is also employed an underlying nature of which the privation is asserted."³ A subject can

¹ P., p.259.

² M., 11, p.96.

³ ARISTOTLE, *Metaph.*, IV, chap.2, 1004a15.

be called "deprived" of a form merely because it does not possess it, even though this form does not pertain to the perfection of that subject considered in itself. The subject is here said to be deprived only in comparison with other subjects which have this perfection. It is in this sense that we say, "the stone lacks sight."

Again, a subject is called "deprived" when it lacks a perfection which, although it does not pertain to the perfection of its species, does belong to other species of the same genus. Because vision is found in other animals, such animals as would be naturally unable to see would be said to lack sight. More strictly, however, a thing is subject to privation when it lacks a perfection which it should possess by reason of its species.

Multipliciter enim dicitur privatio. Uno modo, quando aliquid non habet quod natum est haberi ab alio, etiamsi ipsum non sit natum habere illud: sicut si lapis dicatur res mortua, quia caret vita, quam quaedam res natae sunt habere. Alio modo dicitur privatio, quando aliquid non habet quod natum est haberi ab aliquo sui generis; sicut si talpa dicatur caeca. Tertio modo, quando ipsum non habet quod natum est habere: et hoc modo privatio imperfectionem importat.¹

Finally, in the strictest sense, privation is said of a subject which lacks a form that it should possess, not only by reason of its species, but also because it is the time, the place, etc., for this subject to have this form. A man is not properly said to be blind because he cannot see in the dark; nor is a child (or, for that matter, a craftsman) called ignorant because he does not possess the science of metaphysics.

Ad rationem autem privationis duo requiruntur: quorum primum est remotio habitus oppositi. . . Secundum quod requiritur, est quod privatio proprie dicta sit circa determinatum subjectum et determinatum tempus. Improprie autem sumitur absque determinatione subjecti et temporis. Non enim caecum proprie dicitur nisi quod est aptum natum habere visum, et quando est natum habere visum.²

If privation is negation in an apt subject, what is this subject? It is subjective possibility or potentiality, for to be a subject is of the very nature of potentiality. This potentiality can either be the pure potentiality of prime matter, or a *secundum quid* potentiality, i.e., the potentiality of a being which, although it has substantial being, is in potency to a further act.

Subiectum autem privationis et formae est unum et idem, scilicet ens in potentia: sive sit ens in potentia simpliciter, sicut materia prima, quae est subiectum formae substantialis et privationis oppositae; sive sit ens in potentia secundum quid et in actu simpliciter, ut corpus diaphanum, quod est subiectum tenebrarum et lucis.³

In view of Cusa's reduction of all creatures to the level of material substances, it might be well to review briefly the relation of that potentiality which is matter to privation. St. Thomas, following Aristotle, proves that besides the matter and the form, which are the positive, intrinsic, *per se* principles of the being of a material substance, there is another principle, particularly related to the becoming and to the passing away of the material substance, namely, privation. It is, however, negative, and a principle of becoming *per accidens* only. It can be called a principle of a material substance, since matter, the subject of corruptible being,

¹ ST. THOMAS, *Ia*, q.33, a.4, ad 2.

² ST. THOMAS, *In V Metaph.*, lect.14, n.967; Cf. *In V Metaph.*, lect.20, nn.1070-1078; *In IX*, lect.1, n.1785; *In X*, lect.6.

³ ST. THOMAS, *Ia*, q.48, a.3, c.

has two formalities: it is the subject of a given form, yet it remains in potency to a form other than the one which actuates it. It is with respect to the form it does not have, but may have as one it is naturally able to have and naturally desires, that matter is called the subject of privation. Hence, privation is a principle of becoming and of corruption. As the negation of a form that matter can have, privation itself is a negative principle. It is likewise a *per accidens* principle; for, being negative, it contributes nothing positive to the becoming or being of a material substance. Yet it remains a principle; for matter can become the subject of a form other than the one it now possesses only because of the presence of privation.¹

Because the potentiality of matter may be considered either with respect to the actuating form *in facto esse*, or with respect to the form it may acquire, i.e., in the order of *fieri* or becoming, we may easily fall into the error of confusing these two aspects of matter and even of identifying, as the Platonists did, matter and privation as a single *ratio*.² Because they are one as to the subject, it does not follow that they are formally one. They are, in truth, distinct formalities of the same subject. Potentiality signifies matter's positive order to form, its appetite for form; privation merely denotes the lack of form.

...Et dicitur quod licet subiectum sit unum numero, tamen specie et ratione est duo, ut supra dictum est; quia homo et aurum et omnis materia numerum quendam habet. Est enim ibi considerare ipsum subiectum, quod est aliquid positive, ex quo fit aliquid per se et non per accidens, ut hoc quod est homo et aurum; et est ibi considerare id quod accidit ei, scilicet contrarietatem et privationem, ut immusicum et infiguratum. . . . Patet ergo secundum intentionem Aristotelis quod privatio, quae ponitur principium naturae per accidens, non est aliqua aptitudo ad formam, vel inchoatio formae, vel aliquid principium imperfectum activum, ut quidam dicunt, sed ipsa carentia formae vel contrarium formae, quod subiecto accidit.³

There is another occasion for confusion between potentiality and privation. As negation in an apt subject, privation is non-being. There is also a sense in which matter is non-being. If by being we mean that which *simpliciter* is, being can be said of actual being only. So considered, matter is an instance of the quasi-genus non-being; for, of itself, matter is not actual being. Hence, we may say, being is that which is actual; that which is not actual is non-being. Accordingly, non-being can be predicated of both matter and privation, that is, of positive potentiality for form and of negation. In turn, negation itself can be either simple negation, or negation in an apt subject: privation.

Dicitur enim non ens tripliciter. Uno modo quod nullo modo est; et ex tali non ente non fit generatio, quia ex nihilo nihil fit secundum naturam. Alio modo dicitur non ens ipsa privatio, quae consideratur in aliquo subiecto: et ex tali non ente fit quidem generatio, sed per accidens, in quantum scilicet generatio fit ex subiecto, cui accidit privatio. Tertio modo dicitur non ens ipsa materia, quae, quantum est de se, non est ens actu, sed ens potentia. Et ex tali non ente fit generatio per se.⁴

But if by being we mean not only that which is *simpliciter*, but also that which is *secundum quid*, potentiality, too, is being. In this case, non-being would be restricted to signify negation and privation.

¹ ST. THOMAS, *In I Phys.*, lect.11-12.

² ARISTOTLE, *Phys.*, I, chap.9.

³ ST. THOMAS, *In I Phys.*, lect.13, nn.3-4.

⁴ ST. THOMAS, *In XII Metaph.*, lect.2, n.2437.

Because both privation and potentiality can be called non-being, and are one in subject, some ancient philosophers confused one with the other.

Dicit ergo primo quod quidam philosophi tetigerunt materiam, sed non sufficienter; quia non distinguebant inter privationem et materiam: unde quod est privationis, attribuebant materiae. Et quia privatio secundum se est non ens, dicebant quod materia secundum se est non ens. Et sic, sicut aliquid simpliciter et per se fit ex materia, sic confitebantur quod simpliciter et per se aliquid fit ex non ente. Et ad hoc ponendum duabus rationibus inducebantur. Primo quidem ratione Parmenidis dicentis quod quidquid est praeter ens est non ens: unde cum materia sit praeter ens, quia non est ens actu, dicebant eam simpliciter esse non ens. Secundo vero quia videbatur eis quod id quod est numero unum vel subiecto, sit etiam ratione unum: quod hic appellat esse *potentia* unum, quia ea quae sunt ratione unum, sic se habent quod eadem est virtus utriusque; ea vero quae sunt subiecto unum sed non ratione, non habent eandem potentiam seu virtutem, ut patet in albo et musico. Subiectum autem et privatio sunt unum numero, ut aes et figuratum: unde videbatur eis quod essent idem ratione vel virtute. Sic igitur hic accipit unitatem potentiae.¹

Cusa commits a similar error. Potentiality, he says, is one of the two essential constituents of every created essence, for it is that which limits or contracts the act or perfection of the creature. The act is caused by God, but the potentiality is only *per accidens* and *contingenter*, as it is caused neither by God, nor by any other positive cause. Thus conceived, potentiality cannot be real and positive being. Yet Cusa says that it is an intrinsic principle of every creature's being. Now, the only principle of a material being which is, in one sense, intrinsic and yet not positive being, is privation, — that is, negation in a subject. Thus, Cusa attributes to privation the proper formality of potentiality.

It is this confusion of potentiality with privation which explains Cusa's constant use of the terms *per accidens* and *contingenter* in reference to potentiality. Privation, since it is non being, cannot be *per se* intended by any agent or in any action. It can only come about *per accidens*; that is to say, attaining the form which is intended *per se*, the agent at the same time brings about the privation which is consequent to this form.²

Since (in Cusa's doctrine) one of the two essential constituents of every creature's being has been reduced to privation, and since privation is negation in an apt subject, this privation must have a subject. Now, the other constituent is form, which is act. Hence, if the subject of privation is intrinsic to the substance of the creature, and if form is the only other intrinsic constituent, form, the very perfection of the creature, must be that subject. Therefore, privation is in the act as in a subject. The proper effect of this privation, says Cusa, is to limit the perfection of the creature, i.e., to make the perfection of the creature a finite one. If the act or perfection of the creature is limited, not by something real and positive, but by mere privation, this act, as it is in itself, according to its proper nature, must be infinite and divine. Creatures, then, as conceived by Cusa, are really divinity in privation. If the difference between God and the creature is merely privative, there can be no positive difference between "what God is" and "what the creature is"; God and the creature must be identical as to their positive being. Because of the privation, the creature

¹ ST. THOMAS, *In I Phys.*, lect.15, n.2.

² Cf. ST. THOMAS, *Contra Gent.*, III, cc.4-7.

cannot be called divine, for it does not have the total perfection of divinity; but the perfection which it does possess must be divinity. It is as if we said: In the creature there is actuality. But actuality, as such, does not imply imperfection. Hence, there is in the creature an actuality which does not imply imperfection. Yet this actuality is contracted, not intrinsically (for this is contrary to the nature of actuality as *de se* implying no imperfection), but extrinsically. This actuality plus the extrinsic limitation intrinsically constitute the creature.

According to this conception, God must be considered as having two states of being: one, with privation; the other, without privation. God without privation is God as He is in Himself; God with privation is God as He is in the creatures. But in either state the actuality, the positive being, is exactly the same. The only difference would be that one state would have relatively more positive being than the other.

This conception entails the theory that, in creating, God somehow takes on privation—that He somehow becomes the creatures: "...In maximo vero idem est esse, facere et creare, tunc non aliud videtur esse creare quam Deum omnia esse."¹ The positive constituent, the positive being, of the creature would be divinity itself: "...Et sicut in numero explicante unitatem non reperitur nisi unitas, ita in omnibus, quae sunt, non nisi maximum reperitur."² This would mean that, for God, to be in all things is to be, in them, that which they are: "...Ipsum in omnibus esse id quod sunt. . ."³ To be sure, it is not as though God were everything that the creature is: for the creature has privation; but He would be its positive, absolute content. "Nam sicut Deus, cum sit immensus, non est nec in sole nec in luna, licet in illis sit id, quod sunt, absolute."⁴ Whatever actuality the creature possesses it possesses only in so far as it is in the infinite act. "Quare omnis actualis existentia ab ipso habet, quidquid actualitatis existit, et omnis existentia pro tanto existit actu, pro quanto in ipso infinito actu est."⁵ The creature would be a falling away from the absolute perfection of God into perfection with privation; its *esse* would be *ab esse*, where *ab esse* would mean not efficient causality so much as intrinsic formal causality: in other words, what is positive in it would be the divinity within it.

Quis igitur copulando simul in creatura necessitatem absolutam, a qua est, et contingentiam, sine qua non est, potest intelligere esse eius? Nam videtur, quod ipsa creatura, quae nec est Deus nec nihil, sit quasi post Deum et ante nihil, intra Deum et nihil, ut ait unus sapientum: "Deus est oppositio nihil mediatione entis." Nec tamen potest esse ab esse et non-esse composita. Videtur igitur neque esse, per hoc quod descendit de esse; neque non esse, quia est ante nihil; neque compositum ex illis. Noster autem intellectus, qui nequit transilire contradictoria, divisiva aut compositiva esse creaturae non attingit, quamvis sciat eius esse non esse nisi ab esse maximi.⁵

And what is this *ab esse*?

¹ DI., II, 2, p.66.

² DI., II, 3, p.69.

³ DI., II, 3, p.72.

⁴ DI., II, 4, p.74.

⁵ DI., I, 23, p.46.

⁶ DI., II, 2, p.66.

Si consideras res sine eo [Deo], ita nihil sunt sicut numerus sine unitate. Si consideras ipsum sine rebus, ipse est et res sunt nihil. . . Si consideras ipsum ut est in rebus, res aliquid esse, in quo ipse est, consideras; et in hoc erras, ut patuit in proximo capitulo, quoniam esse rei non est aliud, ut est diversa res, sed eius esse est ab esse.¹

That is, a creature is not one being and God another being, as though two beings were involved. The being of a creature is not something other than the divine being; rather, the being of a creature is intrinsically constituted by the divine being. Its intrinsic being (its *ab esse*) is the divinity within it. It has absolute necessity inasmuch as its positive content, i.e., that by which (*a quâ*) it is constituted, is the divine being. It also has the note of contingency owing to the privation without which it would not be a creature (*sine quâ non est*).

This conception of God as having two states of being explains Cusa's doctrine of the maximum as complication and as explication. "Deus ergo est omnia complicans in hoc, quod omnia in eo; est omnia explicans in hoc, quod ipse in omnibus."² As complication, God is in Himself, — in the state of absolute and eternal perfection, as perfect unity, as the subsistent *ratio* of reality. As explication, He is in the creatures: the unity of God in otherness; His identity in difference; the perfection of God in imperfection; God as descending from the absolute state of the maximum and minimum to the state of the more or less; God in contraction, i.e., God in privation.

God in explication and contraction is still God — God in privation. Hence, all the positive being of the creature—i.e., of God in explication—is divinity; and yet, there being privation, we cannot say that the creature is entirely divine nor that the creature is God absolutely. On the other hand, since all the positive being in the creature is divinity, we cannot deny, either, that the creature is God. In other words, the creature is God, but God in explication, in contraction, in privation. "Homo enim Deus est, sed non absolute, quoniam homo."³

Privation, being negation in a subject, belongs to the quasi-genus of non-being. Conceiving God as being with privation, and privation as potency, i.e., as a real subject, Cusa can also say that God is in nothing, where the term "nothing" signifies a real subject. The proposition "God is in nothing" can be understood in two ways: 1) God is in no created being by way of inherence, nor is He a part of that created being; 2) just as act can be in a potency as in a subject, God can be in nothingness as in a subject. When Cusa says that God is in nothing, he understands the proposition in the second sense. For immediately following the passage cited above, in which he insists that the being of the creature is not different from the being of God (since the being of the creature is *ab esse*, — and we must remember his peculiar understanding of this expression), he adds the following: "Non restat nisi dicere, quod pluralitas rerum exoriatur eo, quod Deus est in nihilo."⁴ These words, as they stand, could be inter-

¹ DI., II, 3, p.71.

² DI., II, 3, p.70.

³ C., II, 14, p.109.

⁴ DI., II, 3, p.71.

preted in the traditional sense, i.e., according to the first of the two meanings of "God is in nothing" as stated above. Yet the very next paragraph in Cusa's text shows that it is the second meaning he has in mind.

Quomodo igitur poterimus intelligere creaturam ut creaturam, quae a Deo est et nihil etiam ex consequenti ei tribuere potest, qui est maximus? Et si ut creatura non habet etiam tantum entitatis sicut accidens, sed est penitus nihil, quomodo intelligitur pluralitatem rerum per hoc explicari, quod Deus est in nihilo, cum nihil non sit alicuius entitatis?¹

There is surely no difficulty in explaining the proposition "God is in nothing," when nothing means "no creature." But we are faced with an insurmountable difficulty in explaining this proposition when "nothing" stands for a real subject having the properties of potency. For then, absolute non-being, the absolute negation of potency and of act: indeed of all being, of all capability for being, — nothingness itself —, becomes a real subject of actuality. "Quomodo intelligitur pluralitatem rerum per hoc explicari, quod Deus est in nihilo, cum nihil non sit alicuius entitatis" can only be asked by one who considers *nihil* as a real subject.

CHAPTER FIVE

I. CUSA'S CONCEPTION OF "QUODLIBET IN QUOLIBET"

In the approach to a limit the variable tends, as it were, to become the limit. It is as if the limit were precontained in the variable: as if one nature were to proceed from another nature. If, *per impossibile*, we could generate whole numbers in this way, every number could be drawn from any number. At the limit, therefore, Anaxagoras' assertion *Quodlibet in quolibet* would come true. Applying, at least extrinsically, the mathematical example to the real order, — it is as if the mind, if only it observed the laws of the "progression," could extract any nature from any other nature. If such a process could be carried through, each being would be the more or less of every other being. There would be but one form, one essence, for the whole of reality. Creatures would be divinity in the order of more or less; each creature would be the more or less of every other creature; God would be the maximum and minimum of all things. There would be a real and universal *quodlibet in quolibet*. And in fact, translating into reality the logic of the method of limits, Cusa teaches that there is a real *quodlibet in quolibet*. To understand this view more fully, we must consider his doctrine concerning the universe of creatures.

According to Cusa, although all creatures are contractions of God, they are not all equally perfect, for there are degrees of contraction. The most perfect of all contractions is the totality of creatures: the universe, which comprises all that is not God. "Universum vero cum omnia complectatur, quae Deus non sunt..."² This universe of creatures, because

¹ DI., II, 3, p.72.

² DI., II, 1, p.64.

it is the most perfect of all the contractions of God, is the contracted maximum. "...Universum est contractum maximum..."¹ Whatever perfection the absolute maximum possesses in the absolute state the contracted maximum has in the contracted state. "...Illa, ut absoluto absolute maxime conveniunt, contracto contracte convenire affirmamus..."² Thus, there is absolute unity, infinity, simplicity, and eternity in the absolute maximum; there is unity in plurality, finiteness and composition in the contracted maximum. The universe is one, but because it is a contracted unity, it has existence only in a plurality; the universe is one being, but because it is a contracted being it has existence only in many beings; the universe is perfection, but because it is contracted perfection it has existence only with imperfection.

Unde, quando recte consideratur de contractione, omnia sunt clara. Nam infinitas contracta aut simplicitas seu indistinctio per infinitum descendit in contractione ab eo, quod est absolutum, ut infinitus et aeternus mundus cadat absque proportione ab absoluta infinitate et aeternitate et unum ab unitate. Unde unitas absoluta ab omni pluralitate absoluta est. Sed contracta unitas, quae est unum universum, licet sit unum maximum, cum sit contractum, non est a pluralitate absolutum, licet non sit nisi unum maximum contractum. Quare, quamvis sit maxime unum, est tamen illa eius unitas per pluralitatem contracta, sicut infinitas per finitatem, simplicitas per compositionem, aeternitas per successionem, necessitas per possibilitatem, et ita de reliquis, quasi absoluta necessitas se communicet absque permixtione et in eius opposito contracte terminetur.³

Just as the absolute maximum is the absolute principle and end of all things, the contracted maximum is the contracted principle and end of all things. "...Principium contractum atque contractus finis rerum..."⁴ As contracted end, the universe is first in the intention of God, for the whole is intended before the parts.

Tamen, sicut in intentione artificis est prius totum, puta domus, quam pars, puta paries, ita dicimus, quia ex intentione Dei omnia in esse prodierunt, quod tunc universum prius prodiit et in eius consequentiam omnia, sine quibus nec universum nec perfectum esse posset.⁵

Because it is the most perfect created image of the absolute maximum, the universe is the contracted end of each thing; it is the most perfect of the contracted perfections to which each thing can tend.

As contracted principle, the universe precedes all creatures by an order of nature. "Universum enim quasi ordine naturae ut perfectissimum praecessit omnia..."⁶ It is because *all* things were created that *each* thing was created; it is as a consequence of the totality being made that the various parts were made. Hence the production of the universe must not be conceived as though one part were made first and then another. Rather, the totality was made by one simple emanation from the absolute maximum. Thus it is that we may call the universe the contracted principle of each thing.

Quoniam vero dictum est universum esse principium contractum tantum atque in hoc maximum, patet, quomodo per simplicem emanationem maximi contracti a

¹ DI., II, 4, p.73.

² DI., II, 4, p.73.

³ DI., II, 4, p.73.

⁴ DI., II, 4, p.73.

⁵ DI., II, 4, p.75.

⁶ DI., II, 5, p.76.

maximo absoluto totum universum prodiit in esse. Omnia autem entia, quae sunt partes universi, sine quibus universum—cum sit contractum—unum, totum et perfectum esse non posset, simul cum universo in esse prodierunt, et non prius intelligentia, deinde anima nobilis, deinde natura, ut voluit Avicenna et alii philosophi. Tamen, sicut in intentione artificis est prius totum, puta domus, quam pars, puta paries, ita dicimus, quia ex intentione Dei omnia in esse prodierunt, quod tunc universum prius prodiit et in eius consequentiam omnia, sine quibus nec universum nec perfectum esse posset.¹

Not only is the universe the contracted principle and end of all creatures, it is also the contracted quiddity of all the essences. In the absolute maximum, all essences are one essence; in absolute unity and perfection the essence of God is each and every essence; the essence of each and every thing is the essence of God. The universe, too, is the quiddity of all things; but it is a contracted quiddity. For, whereas the absolute quiddity is absolute unity, this contracted quiddity is unity in plurality, identity in diversity. The contracted quiddity is one quiddity, but it exists only as divided into many quiddities; only as contracted into the lesser quiddities. "Est enim Deus quidditas absoluta mundi seu universi; universum vero est ipsa quidditas contracta. Contractio dicit ad aliquid, ut ad essendum hoc vel illud. Deus igitur, qui est unus, est in uno universo; universum vero est in universis contracte."² In the sun, the quiddity of the universe is contracted into the quiddity of the sun; in the moon, the quiddity of the universe is contracted into that of the moon. So it is for the other beings in the universe.

Nam sicut Deus, cum sit immensus, non est nec in sole nec in luna, licet in illis sit id, quod sunt, absolute: ita universum non est in sole nec in luna, sed in ipsis est id, quod sunt, contracte. Et quia quidditas solis absoluta non est aliud a quidditate absoluta lunae — quoniam est ipse Deus, qui est entitas et quidditas absoluta omnium et quidditas contracta solis est alia a quidditate contracta lunae — quia, ut quidditas absoluta rei non est res ipsa, ita contracta non est aliud quam ipsa —; quare patet quod, cum universum sit quidditas contracta, quae aliter est in sole contracta et aliter in luna, hinc identitas universi est in diversitate sicut unitas in pluralitate. Unde universum, licet non sit nec sol nec luna, est tamen in sole sol et in luna luna.³

For there is an order in contraction. Before all contraction there is God, the absolute maximum, Who actually exists as separated from all contraction. Then, there is the universe, which actually exists only as contracted by the ten most general genera, the predicaments. These predicaments, again, actually exist only as contracted by the various genera, which in turn actually exist only as contracted by the different species. The species, in turn, actually exist only as contracted by the individuals, which alone (aside from God) have actual existence in themselves.

Est igitur universum quasi decem generalissimorum universitas, et deinde genera, deinde species. Et ita universalia sunt illa secundum gradus suos, quae ordine quodam naturae gradatim ante rem, quae actu ipsa contrahit, existunt. Et quoniam universum est contractum, tunc non reperitur nisi in generibus explicatum, et genera non reperuntur nisi in speciebus; individua vero sunt actu, in quibus sunt contracte universa.⁴

Hence the universe has actual existence only in the individuals into which it has been contracted through the media of the genera and species. By

¹ DI., II, 4, p.74.

² DI., II, 4, p.75.

³ DI., II, 4, p.74.

⁴ DI., II, 6, p.80.

order of nature, the universe, as well as the universals, has a priority over the individuals; a universality or a contractability by these individuals. But the universe and the universals have no actual existence apart from the individuals, even though the mind can consider them as abstracted from the individuals.

Et in ista consideratione videtur, quomodo universalia, non sunt nisi contracte actu; et eo quidem modo verum dicunt Peripatetici universalia extra res non esse actu. Solum enim singulare actu est, in quo universalia sunt contracte ipsum. Habent tamen universalia ordine naturae quoddam esse universale, contrahibile per singulare — non quod sint actu ante contractionem aliter quam naturali ordine, ut universale contrahibile in se non subsistens, sed in eo, quod actu est; sicut punctus, linea, superficies ordine progressivo corpus, in quo actu tantum sunt, praecedunt. Universum enim quia non est actu nisi contracte, ita omnia universalia: Non sunt universalia solum entia rationis, licet non reperiantur extra singularia actu; sicut et linea et superficies, licet extra corpus non reperiantur, propterea non sunt entia rationis tantum, quoniam sunt in corpore sicut universalia in singularibus. Intellectus tamen facit ea extra res per abstractionem esse. Quae quidem abstractio est ens rationis, quoniam absolutum esse eis convenire non potest. Universale enim penitus absolutum Deus est.¹

Since the universe exists only as a contraction, and since each quiddity is a contraction of the universe, the universe exists in each quiddity. This does not mean that the universe is to be identified with each lower quiddity, for the universe is the totality of created beings; but it does mean that in each thing the universe is that thing: that although the universe is neither the sun nor the moon but the whole of creation, yet in the sun, the universe is the sun; and in the moon, the universe is the moon.

... Cum universum sit quidditas contracta, quae aliter est in sole contracta et aliter in luna, hinc identitas universi est in diversitate sicut unitas in pluralitate. Unde universum, licet non sit nec sol nec luna, est tamen in sole sol et in luna luna...²

So it is with all the beings of the universe. In each being the universe is that being, for each being is a contradiction of the universe. "Non est autem universum nisi contracte in rebus, et omnis res actu existens contrahit universa, ut sint actu id, quod est."³ And since the universe which is the totality of creatures is in each thing, everything is in each thing, and each thing is everything. *Quodlibet est in quolibet*. But because each thing cannot be all things actually — for then it would be God — it contracts all things so that they become that thing.

Si acute iam dicta attendis, non erit tibi difficile videre veritatis illius Anaxagorici 'quodlibet esse in quolibet' fundamentum fortassis altius Anaxagora. Nam cum manifestum sit ex primo libro Deum ita esse in omnibus, quod omnia sunt in ipso, et nunc constet Deum quasi mediante universo esse in omnibus, hinc omnia in omnibus esse constat et quodlibet in quolibet. Universum enim quasi ordine naturae ut perfectissimum praecessit omnia, ut quodlibet in quolibet esse posset. In qualibet enim creatura universum est ipsa creatura, et ita quodlibet recipit omnia, ut in ipso sint ipsum contracte. Cum quodlibet non possit esse actu omnia, cum sit contractum, contrahit omnia, ut sint ipsum. Si igitur omnia sunt in omnibus, omnia videntur quodlibet praecedere. Non igitur omnia sunt plura, quoniam pluralitas non praecedat quodlibet. Unde omnia sine pluralitate praecesserunt quodlibet ordine naturae. Non sunt igitur plura in quolibet actu, sed omnia sine pluralitate sunt idipsum.⁴

¹ DL., II, 6, p.80.

² DL., II, 4, p.74.

³ DL., II, 5, p.76.

⁴ DL., II, 5, p.76.

Because in each thing all things are actually that thing, all the universe is in stone as stone, in the vegetative soul as vegetative soul, in sight as sight, in intellect as intellect, in God as God. "Nam omnia in lapide lapis, et in anima vegetativa ipsa anima, et in vita vita, et in sensu sensus, in visu visus, in auditu auditus, in imaginatione imaginatio, in ratione ratio, in intellectu intellectus, in Deo Deus."¹

Since, then, the universe is the contraction of God and since each thing is the contraction of the universe, *quodlibet in quolibet*. In man all things are man, in intellect all things are intellect. Thus, through the medium of the universe, God is contractedly in each thing and each thing is in God. "...Deus, qui est unitas simplicissima, existendo in uno universo est quasi ex consequenti mediante universo in omnibus, et pluralitas rerum mediante uno universo in Deo."²

II. CRITIQUE OF THIS DOCTRINE

Since (according to Cusa) the universe is a unity of many complete substances which do not lose their identity in that unity, the universe is an *unum per accidens*. Being an *unum per accidens*, the universe is an accidental, actual whole: a kind of integral whole, in which the being of each part is distinct from the being of the whole of which it is a part. Thus the universe would have the same relation to its parts that a house has to its parts.

With this notion of the universe as an *unum per accidens*, an accidental actual whole, Cusa combines the notion that the universe is the supreme created genus. This aspect of his conception, too, stands out clearly. The relation of the universe to its parts is the same as that of genus to species: "Est enim Deus quidditas absoluta mundi seu universi; universum vero est ipsa quidditas contracta. Contractio dicit ad aliquid, ut ad-essendum hoc vel illud."³ The universe is contracted into the ten predicaments, then into the various genera, then into species, and finally into the individuals, which alone have actual existence:

Est igitur universum quasi decem generalissimorum universitas, et deinde genera, deinde species. Et ita universalia sunt illa secundum gradus suos, quae ordine quodam naturae gradatim ante rem, quae actu ipsa contrahit, existunt.⁴

Cusa explains the various aspects of the universe, genera, and species in exactly the same way: they precede their inferiors by an order of nature; they have actual existence only in the particulars; they have separated or abstracted being only in the mind.

Universum enim quia non est actu nisi contracte, ita omnia universalia: Non sunt universalia solum entia rationis, licet non reperiantur extra singularia actu; sicut et linea et superficies, licet extra corpus non reperiantur, propterea non sunt entia rationis tantum, quoniam sunt in corpore sicut universalia in singularibus. Intellectus tamen

¹ DI., II, 5, p.77.

² DI., II, 4, p.75.

³ DI., II, 4, p.75.

⁴ DI., II, 6, p.80.

facit ea extra res per abstractionem esse. Quae quidem abstractio est ens rationis, quoniam absolutum esse eis convenire non potest.¹

This conception of the universe as the supreme created genus shows that Cusa has confused the notion of a potential logical whole with that of an actual whole. A potential or logical whole does not actually contain its parts, whereas an actual whole does.

Now, in relation to its parts, the universe is an actual whole, for it actually contains all these parts. The universe is a whole which is actually composed of minerals, plants, animals, men, and angels. Since the universe is not one substance but a union of these many substances, it is only an accidental actual whole. Such a whole cannot be predicated of its parts. Army cannot be predicated of each soldier; house cannot be predicated of the walls of a house.

The relation of genus to species, on the other hand, is that of a potential whole, for a genus does not contain the species actually but potentially. The species are not, as are the parts of a house to the house, the constituent elements of a genus. When species are considered as parts of a genus, it is not because they actually enter into the composition of the genus; they are said to be parts inasmuch as the genus can be actualized further by the various specific differences to become this or that species. A genus, or a predicable species, does have the notion of an actual whole in relation to the elements which constitute its *ratio*. Thus, house as an actual whole is intrinsically constituted by the union of walls and roof for the purpose of shelter. But when house is considered as an actual whole it is not predicated of its constituent parts; a wall, roof, etc., are not house but actual parts of house. When house is being considered as a potential whole, the consideration is not centered primarily upon the intrinsic constitution of house, but rather upon the various ways in which this intrinsic constitution can be further actualized in the species. Thus, house as an actual whole is divided into basement, walls, and roof; house as a potential whole is divided into wooden house, brick house, stucco house. All that is actual in the notion of house — its intrinsic composition — is predicated of each species, for each species contains the whole of the actual constitution of the genus along with the further actualization of the specific difference. Thus a brick house contains all the intrinsic constitution of house: basement, walls, and roof, along with the further actualization that these parts are now made of brick.

Cusa has confused, then, the notions of actual and of potential whole. He considers the universe, the genera, and the species as actual wholes composed of their inferiors, and again as potential wholes which are predicated of these same inferiors. Thus the universe is first considered as an actual whole composed of all the creatures: its being is constituted by the union of these creatures; and it is then considered as a potential whole in relation to these same creatures: it is predicated of each and every creature — the stone is the universe; the vegetative soul is the universe; man is the universe. But since the creatures are actual parts of an actual whole

¹ DI., II, 6, p.80.

— the universe — and since whole is greater than part, Cusa concludes that the creatures do not receive all of the perfection of the universe: rather they limit or contract it. In stone, the universe becomes stone; in the vegetative soul, the universe becomes the vegetative soul; in man, the universe becomes man.

Since the universe for Cusa is both actual and potential whole in relation to the creatures, and since the relation of genera and species, and species to individuals, is the same for him as the relation of the universe to the creatures, genera become actual and potential wholes in relation to species, and species become actual and potential wholes in relation to the individuals. Thus genera are intrinsically constituted by the species of which they are predicated; they are predicated of the parts — species — by which they are intrinsically constituted. The same is true of species in relation to the individuals.

When Cusa says that a genus becomes a species his meaning is very different from the traditional one. According to the traditional teaching, "genus becomes a species" means that that which is imperfect — the genus — has now become that which is perfect — the species. For something of the potentiality of the genus has now been actualized in the species; all that is actual in the genus, its constituent notes, is now in the species along with more perfection: that of the specific difference. When Cusa says that a genus is contracted into a species, he means that that which is perfect — the genus — has now become that which is imperfect — the species. There is no increase of perfection, but diminution of it, seeing that the species does not further actualize the genus, but contracts it or makes it more potential. To put it differently, the species does not have all the actuality of the genus, for the actuality of the genus is the sum total of all the perfections of all its species which constitute it as an actual whole.

This is why Cusa insists on the point that the inferiors never attain the actual perfection of their immediate universal: that the genera never achieve the perfection of the universe; the species never attain the perfection of the genera; the individuals never reach the perfection of the species. *Non est igitur nisi unus terminus aut specierum aut generum aut universi, qui est centrum, circumferentia atque connexio omnium. Et universum non evacuat ipsam infinitam absolute maximam Dei potentiam, ut sit simpliciter maximum terminans Dei potentiam. Non attingit itaque universum terminum maximitatis absolutae, neque genera terminum universi attingunt neque species terminum generum neque individua terminum specierum...*¹

For any particular to have all the actual perfection of its immediate universal, it would have to have the perfections of all the other particulars under that universal, for its immediate universal is the sum total of all the perfections of its particulars. Hence for an individual to have the perfection of its species, it would have to have all the perfections of all the other individuals. But to be a perfect species, according to Cusa, means to have all the perfections of the genus. For a perfect genus there is needed the perfections of all the genera. To have the perfections of all the genera

¹ DL., III, 1, p.120.

means to have all the perfection of the universe. To have all the perfection of the universe means to be God. The individual that is perfect in its species would have to be a creature that is the creator. This, for Cusa, is the unique prerogative of Christ.¹

Thus, for Cusa, all created reality is but a more or less in relation to God who is the maximum. An individual is a more or less of a species, which is a more or less of a proximate genus; this in turn is but a more or less of a remote genus; which is a more or less of the created universe; which is but a more or less of God who is the maximum. Because God and creation are one in essence and nature, there is a universal *quodlibet in quolibet*: all reality is each being according to the mode of that being.

A schematic presentation of Cusa's notion of contraction might be attempted in some manner like the following:

- (1) God, the Absolute.
- (2) God contracted..... Universe of creatures.
- (3) Universe contracted..... Predicaments.
- (4) Predicaments contracted..... Genera.
- (5) Genera contracted..... Species.
- (6) Species contracted..... Individuals.

Again, from his notion of contraction, which amounts to a consideration of the creatures as privations of the act that is God, we obtain a similar schema:

- (1) God, the Actual.
- (2) God with privation..... Universe.
- (3) Universe with privation..... Predicaments.
- (4) Predicaments with privation..... Genera.
- (5) Genera with privation..... Species.
- (6) Species with privation..... Individuals.

The important consideration here is that we must not regard these hierarchies as though there were a multitude of essences, each having a proper place in the hierarchy. For Cusa teaches that there is only one *ratio* — the Divinity — which is predicated of the whole of reality. The *ratio* predicated of God is the same proper and formal *ratio* that is predicated of the creatures; the differences between God and the creatures do not derive from any difference in essence but from the various modes in which this ratio or essence is received.

Diceris forte usum beryllii praesupponere essentiam recipere magis et minus; alioquin per maximum pariter et minimum non videretur eius principium. Respondeo, quod, quamvis essentia secundum se non videatur magis et minus recipere, tamen secundum comparisonem ad esse et actus proprios speciei magis et minus participat secundum dispositionem naturae recipientis.²

Cusa admits that there are differences between God and the creatures; but he denies that these differences come from a diversity of *ratio*. All difference is *per accidens* and *contingenter*; for it is outside the order of essence and is to be explained entirely by reason of the subject, that is to say, potency.

¹ DI., III, 1-3.

² B. 20, p.23.

Again, it is true that, in a certain sense, Cusa does speak of different essences and different natures. He does admit that the contracted essence of the sun is different from the contracted essence of the moon. But these admissions, as Cusa understands them, only mean this: the essence of moon and sun are really only one essence, the absolute essence of God; but because of the subjects involved, *per accidens* and *contingenter* they are unity in plurality, unity in otherness, i.e., one essence in two subjects. But the otherness, which arises from the subjects involved, is outside the order of essence. Therefore, if we regard the essence of the sun and the moon in themselves, i.e., apart from all subjects, we are really faced with the absolute unity of the divine essence.

Quando attendis ex multitudine unitatis numerum constitui, ac quod alteritas sequitur multiplicationem contingenter, et advertis compositionem numeri ex unitate et alteritate, ex eodem et diverso, ex pari et impari, ex dividuo et individuo, ac quod quidditas rerum omnium exorta est, ut sit numerus divinae mentis, tunc aliquantulum attingis, quomodo essentiae rerum sunt incorruptibiles uti unitas, ex qua numerus, qui est entitas, et quomodo res sunt sic et sic ex alteritate, quae non est de essentia numeri, sed contingenter unitatis multiplicationem sequens. Ita quidem alteritas de nullius rei essentia est. Pertinet enim ad interitum alteritas, quia divisio est, ex qua corruptio. Hinc de essentia rei non est.¹

The hierarchies, then, are in truth a series of one essence only. This essence is considered either in the absolute state as it exists in itself — God; or as it exists in various subjects — the creatures. Because this one essence, which is predicated of all reality, is found in the perfect state in God, whereas in creatures it is found in various degrees of imperfection, God is the maximum, while creatures are only more or less. Hence, any perfection in the creature is only more or less, for God alone is the maximum. Thus, the sensible sun and moon are only more and less: God is the absolute or maximum sun and moon; vegetative life as found in the created order is only more or less, for God is absolute or maximum life; human life as present in this world is only more or less, for God is the absolute or maximum humanity. In each and every order of perfection God alone is the absolute, the maximum, and the term, whereas creatures are always contractions, the more or less, and that which is terminated; for there is really only one *ratio*, one essence, one form for the whole of reality. Wherefore, there is a real *quodlibet in quolibet*: God is each creature in the maximum state, and each creature is God in the state of more or less. "Non est ergo aliud dicere 'quodlibet esse in quolibet' quam Deum per omnia esse in omnibus et omnia per omnia esse in Deo."²

CONCLUSION

Such, briefly, is the doctrine of Cusa concerning the being of God and of the creature. Our treatment is by no means complete, — that could be achieved only by comparing the whole of Cusa with the entire *Prima Pars* of St. Thomas. None the less, we do feel that this essay indicates sufficiently the foundation of Cusa's entire thought concerning God and

¹ M., 6, p.72.

² DI., II, 5, p.76.

the creature. This foundation, as emphasized throughout the present study, is Cusa's projection into reality of the logic of the method of limits.

We are convinced that Cusa cannot be understood apart from the framework of the method of limits. Whoever interprets his works as though he were proceeding in the natural mode, cannot but miss the perspective that governs the whole of Cusa's thought — the method of limits. To imagine that Cusa's notion of God as the maximum is identical with that of the *Quarta Via* of St. Thomas; to conceive of the *coincidentia oppositorum* as though it were the traditional doctrine concerning the presence in God of all perfection; to identify Cusa's delineation of the creature as a more or less of God with the Christian conception of the creature as a participation of God — this is to destroy Cusa's peculiar approach to the problem of God and of the creature. Such an interpretation is blind to what is most essential and original in Cusa's work: that he proceeds according to the mode of a reified method of limits. Because he has misunderstood the legitimate use of this method, and translated its logic into reality, Cusa has conceived of God both as the universal predicate of all things, and as a subjective possibility which has been actualized from all eternity. Far from safeguarding the transcendence of God, such a doctrine really reduces God to the level of the creature. This, as we have tried to show, is a necessary consequence of envisioning God as the real limit of the creature. It is this same misuse of the method of limits that explains both Cusa's insistence that *any* perfection said of the creature can only be more or less, and his doctrine of *quodlibet in quolibet*.

Much remains to be done. Cusa's conception of man and of human knowledge is most important for a fuller understanding of his doctrine. By reifying a distinctively human mode of cognition, Cusa has, in reality, made man the measure of all being. Claiming a perfect adequacy between measure and mathematics, he suggests that all human cognition, especially man's knowledge of God, is mathematical. These pivotal doctrines in Cusa's thought, — his conception of man, and of human knowledge as mathematical —, deserve to be closely examined; this we hope to do in another essay.

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