

Nicholas of Cusa and the Names of God
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In the following lecture, I will attempt to set out the basic structure of Cusanus' philosophical theology by means of an exposition of the *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*.¹ In this text, Cusa depicts his reception and recapitulation of an explicitly 'neo-Platonic' tradition, and his refusal or rejection of a distinct, 'neo-Aristotelian' tradition. This distinction is made by Cusa with respect to both the basic principles of each, and to their relative predominance in his own historical moment. In both of these contexts, Cusa asserts a relation of contestation and competition rather than concordance between these two traditions – regarding both their methods, and their concepts of God – that becomes essential to the basic structure and significance of the character of his theology, as 'neo-Platonic.' In this way, I hope to address the problem of the 'names of God' in both a conceptual (a philosophical or a theological) sense, and a historiographic sense.

The *Apologia* (*ADI*; 1449) is constituted as much by its context as by its content. In it, Cusa defends his own theological principles and positions from the critique, or attack, of the Heidelberg Aristotelian theologian Johannes Wenck's *De ignota litteratura* (*DIL*; 1442-43).² In it, Cusa explicates his earliest systematic treatise, the *De Docta Ignorantia* (*DDI*; 1440), most extensively, and refers also to an intervening text, the *De coniecturis* (*DC*; 1441-42).³ Thus, on the way to the *ADI*, we will examine the *DDI*; to clarify, and perhaps qualify, its central claims, I will discuss the *DC*, thus contextualizing more fully the debate, or diatribe, between Wenck and Cusa as contained in the *DIL* and the *ADI*.⁴ Only in this last text is the contestation

¹ *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia*, v. II, ed. R. Klibansky (Leipzig, F. Meiner, 1932). For ease of consultation, I use Jasper Hopkins' translation, from the *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa* (Minneapolis, Banning Press, 2001), v. I, pp 459-92. This essay does not define Platonism independently, but rather explores the basic characteristics of Cusa's early theology, beginning with his *De docta ignorantia*, in order to depict Cusa's own retrospective account of its specifically 'Platonic' character, in the *ADI*.

² *Le 'de ignota litteratura' de Jean Wenck de Herrenberg contre Nicolas de Cuse* (*BGPTM* 8, 6), E. Vansteenberghe, ed. (Muenster, Ascendorff Verlag, 1910); English edition by Jasper Hopkins; *Nicholas of Cusa's Debate with John Wenck: A Translation and an Appraisal of De ignota litteratura and Apologia doctae ignorantiae* (Minneapolis, Banning Press, 1981). See Haubst, *Studien zu Nikolaus von Kues und Johannes Wenck, Beitrage zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters* 38 (Muenster, Aschendorff, 1955), p 99 ff, where Haubst discusses Wenck's rebuttal to Cusa's *Apologia* (*De facie scholae doctae ignorantiae*), unfortunately lost (*Ibid*, 102).

³ *De Coniecturis*, *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia*, v. III (edited by Josef Koch and Karl Bormann) of *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia* (Hamburg: F. Meiner Verlag, 1972)]. Jasper Hopkins, *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa* (Minneapolis, Banning Press, 2001), v. I, pp 160-298. For the *DI*, see *ibid.*, 1-159.

⁴ I suggest that *DDI* and *DC* differ in the quality of their accounts of the character of our knowledge of God. Cranz, in "The Transmutation of Platonism in the Development of Nicolaus Cusanus and of Martin Luther," in *Nicolò Cusano agli Inizi del Mondo Moderno* [Sansoni, Firenze, 1970] 73-102) discusses similar developments in the 'late works beginning with the *De principio* of 1459 through the *De apice theoriae* of

between neo-Platonic and neo-Aristotelian theology, and the specific character of Cusa's depiction and election of the former, fully articulate.

In *De Docta Ignorantia*, Cusa advances an account of human knowledge, and knowledge of God, through a three-fold structure.⁵ Cusa articulates the faculty of cognition into three capacities or powers, and three respective employments. He depicts 'the senses, reason, and the intellect,' their natures and limits, by depicting the character of 'the objects apprehended' by each.⁶ This structure, then, incorporates (1) perceptual, (2) rational, and (3) intellective activity, and conceives of each in terms of an objective, or self-objectifying, relation. In and for each form of apprehension, there obtains a *terminus a quo* – *terminus ad quem* structure, a distinction or difference between a faculty that 'measures' and an object that is 'measured.'⁷ For this reason, Cusa writes (in the terms of *De Coniecturis*) of a 'perceptual sight' of a sensible object, of a 'rational sight,' as defines the activity and formal objectivity of *ratio*, and of an 'intellectual sight' particular to *intellectus*. Cusa thus solicits his reader to 'investigate perceptual sight perceptibly, rational sight rationally, and intellectual sight intellectually,' in order to depict the nature and limits of the objectivity specific to each cognitive endeavor, and the isomorphism of their objective structures. Each, in this way, functions successively as moments in a *progressus* from perceptual knowledge and rational knowledge to knowledge of God.⁸

1464' (83). For Crazz, only in this late stage of Cusa's "theology of mind" is "the dualism of explication as against image overcome" (86). See, similarly, Santino Caramella, 'Il problema di una logica trascendente nell'ultima fase del pensiero di Nicola Cusano,' in *Nicolò Cusano agli Inizi del Mondo Moderno* (Sansoni, Firenze, 1970) 367-74, for a "una logica trascendente...della rivelazione" as 'presentato dal Cusano già nel *De visione Dei*' and its *sensibile experimentum* of 1453. While this internal difference, within Cusa's early theory, is more subtle than the external difference, and conflict, between his and Wenck's theories of knowledge as such, one may better appreciate the latter difference in light of the former.

⁵ On the general theme of Cusa's theory of knowledge, I am indebted to Werner Beierwaltes, *Identität und Differenz. Zum Prinzip cusanischen Denkens* (Vittorio Klostermann 2011) and *Visio absoluta. Reflection als Grundzug des göttlichen Prinzips bei Nikolaus Cusanus* (Heidelberg, Carl Winter, 1978). See also Norbert Fischer, 'Zur philosophischen Struktur des Cusanischen Denkens,' *Theologie und Glaube* 91 (2001), 24-42 and T. Van Velthoven, *Gottesschau und menschliche Kreativität: Studien zur Erkenntnislehre des Nikolaus von Kues* (Leiden, Brill, 1977), the essays in *El problema del conocimiento en Nicolás de Cusa: Genealogía y proyección*, Jorge M. Machetta, Claudia D'Amico eds. (Buenos Aires, Biblos, 2004), and *Nikolaus von Kues in der Geschichte des Erkenntnisproblems*, ed. Rudolf Haubst, (Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1975).

⁶ DDI I, 4, 11.

⁷ DDI I, 3, 9. Cf. DDI III, 6, 215. For the *ad quem* - *a quo* distinction see particularly DC II, 1. This basic three-fold methodological structure remains constant across the virtual entirety of Cusa's works. For the levels of cognition see, e.g., *De Quaerendo Deum* I, 25; *Idiota De Mente* I, 5, 80, *De Beryllo* 5, *De Possess* 62-63, 74, *De Ludo Globi* I, 26 and I, 44, etc. For the tripartite 'sensible, rational, intellectual' structure and for a meditation on the significance of vision, across those levels, see H. Lawrence Bond, "The "Icon" and the "Iconic" Text in Nicholas of Cusa's *De Visione Dei* I-XVII," 177-95, in *Nicholas of Cusa and His Age: Intellect and Spirituality*, Thomas Izbicki and Christopher Bellitto eds. (Brill, Leiden, 2002).

⁸ DC, II, i, 72-73.

In *De Docta Ignorantia*, Cusa's intention is to delimit, rather than only depict, the sphere of visibility that results from the objectival form of each activity. 'Vision' in this way is a synecdoche both for each of the five senses and for the conceptual activities of the two subsequent forms of purely intellectual endeavor. Perceptual vision evinces a relation between a visible image or object (as a *terminus ad quem* of such a perceptual act) and the faculty or power of vision itself (as a *terminus a quo* of such a perceptual act). The latter is not only irreducible to the objectivity or sphere of visibility that its activity produces; it is, also, invisible to its own produced objectivity. Thus, it is prior to, and lies above, its self-objectification, as the latter's ground and possibility-condition.

In this way, perceptual vision provides a rule for Cusa's account of rational or conceptual 'vision,' the mind's relation to its formal objects. In the latter case, too, the understanding (*ratio*) is not only irreducible, but is also invisible, to its modes, the conceptual objects that are the manifestations of its power and products of its activity. Reason (as Cusa would put the point in *De coniecturis*) "takes delight in these manifestations," the ideas, concepts, and judgments it projects through its activity, "as the unfolding [*explicatio*] of its power."⁹ Upon discovering this formal limitation or constitutive blindness, we will "see very clearly that reason enfolds within itself truths" or grounds that it, reason as such, "cannot reveal" (*ibid*). Only then, by means of 'the intellect [*intellectus*]' are such contradictories set in a proper and living unity, in which the coincidence of the *ad quem* and the *a quo*, the determining and determined elements of cognition, are established positively and reciprocally.

Here in *De Docta Ignorantia*, Cusa does not argue as much for the ingredience and determinability of this originary source within the life of the mind, as for its invisibility and inaccessibility. At the beginning of this *progressus* or ascent, we read that a full comprehension of our knowledge, and knowledge of God, requires that we must renounce, or 'leave behind all perceptible things' so that we may 'ascend unto simple intellectuality,' or proceed from the first stage of sensible theology to the subsequent stages of symbolic and speculative theology.¹⁰ The relation between the

⁹ *DC* II, I. For a similar formulation in *DDI*, see I, 4, 12. Reason, there, effects a 'procession' or 'extension' from a ground that not only produces this extension (without being reducible to it), but that thus enforces its insuperability (*DDI* I, 9, 24). Reason 'cannot leap beyond [the] contradictories,' that it establishes through its activity, and that result in the character of our experience and the *a quo - ad quem* distinction that defines it. This formal structure must be superseded; reason, 'falls far short of this [its] infinite power' precisely because and insofar as it accomplishes the finite objectivities that constitute the flow of our rational life. (On the concepts of *explicatio* and *complicatio*, see Carlo Riccati, 'Processio' et 'Explicatio': *La doctrine de la création chez Jean Scot et Nicolas de Cues* (Napoli, Bibliopolis, 1983) and Maurice de Gandillac, 'Explicatio - complicatio chez Nicolas de Cues,' *Concordia Discors: Studi su Niccolò Cusano e L'umanesimo europeo offerti a Giovanni Santinello* (Padova 1993, 77-106, and Thomas P. McTighe, 'The meaning of the couple 'complicatio-explicatio' in the philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa,' in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 32 (Washington 1958), 206-214. For Blumenberg, of course, Cusa's 'theory of *complicatio* and *explicatio* as the definition of the relation between Creator and creation had destroyed the Aristotelian support of the entire Scholastic metaphysics.' See *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Robert M. Wallace, trans. (MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 509.

¹⁰ *DDI*, I, 2-3, 8. Later (*DI* III, 6, 205), Cusa depicts the compulsion toward, and turn from, sensibility more dramatically, in affective as well as epistemic terms. It is not

former and the latter is here one of exclusion and opposition; ‘corporeal and spiritual things are related to each other as contraries’ to such a degree that ‘the life of one is the death of the other.’¹¹ This opposition Cusa depicts dramatically, in an Origenist or Augustinian vocabulary, as a ‘turning to what is corruptible’ that is equally a ‘turn away from truth.’ This ‘turn’ is also a ‘fall’ toward ‘corruptible objects of desire,’ a ‘descent of the intellect unto intellectual death.’¹²

It is not only at this first stage of this mystical ascent that a renunciation is required. Ascending from perceptual to rational activity, we remain incapable of an encompassing vision or comprehension of this second aspect of our faculty of cognition as well. Here, too, we cannot ‘by means of reason, combine contradictories in their Beginning,’ or determine dialectically the relation between the pre-objective *terminus a quo* of rational activity, and the objective *terminus ad quem* of such activity. Only the latter can be revealed to reason, while the former remains veiled to it necessarily and in principle, just as in the previous, aesthetic case. The certitude that we possess of the fecundity of such an origin is, by means of *ratio*, merely a negative certitude; while certain of its effectivity, we can possess positively this effectivity only indirectly, in its already accomplished products (rather than in its originary efficacy), and thus as a negation or an absence.¹³ In this way, the frustrations of *visio* and *ratio* are propaedeutic to the satisfaction and resolution to be provided by *intellectus*.¹⁴ In the former cases, we do not accumulate progressively the elements of a positive theological self-knowledge as much as eliminate progressively elements that must be subtracted therefrom: ‘we must leave behind the things that, together with their material associations,’ are ‘attained through the senses, through the imagination or reason.’¹⁵

In the early *DDI*, Cusa depicts the theological significance of each such *terminus ad quem* negatively. Here, the relation of invisibility to visibility is one of negation or absence rather than ingredience. Their relation is depicted through oppositional,

only that ‘the senses are incapable of supratemporal and spiritual things’ (including the perception of the faculty through which such perceptual data are received, the ground of our aesthetic activity) but also that we thus labor ‘in the darkness of the ignorance of eternal things’ to the degree to which we are ‘moved through the power of concupiscence toward carnal desires’ and their objects. Cf. *ibid*, III, 6, 252.

¹¹ *DDI* III, 9, 236.

¹² *DDI* III, 9, 241.

¹³ *DDI* I, 9-10, 27. Perceptual knowledge is a ‘contracted knowledge’ insofar as ‘the senses attain only to particulars.’ Instead, ‘intellectual knowledge,’ is ‘universal knowledge because in comparison with the perceptual it is free from contraction to the particular.’ However, it is nonetheless not free from contraction to the objective, or necessarily objectival form of reason as such (*DDI* III, 4, 205). Though the mind is not alienated by a percept, materially, it remains nonetheless alienated, formally, from its ground or point of origin. See also *DDI*, III, 4, 206.

¹⁴ On the relation between reason and intellect in Cusa’s 1440’s writings, see F. Edward Cranz ‘Reason, Intellect, and the Absolute in Nicholas of Cusa, in *Nicholas of Cusa and the Renaissance*’ (Ashgate, Aldershot, 2000), 31-42.

¹⁵ In *DDI* II, this language of exclusion is amplified. As above, ‘we cannot experience in perceptual objects a most agreeable, undefective harmony, since it is not present there.’ For this reason, ‘the soul’ must be ‘freed from perceptible objects.’ That we are to be freed-from sensibility is clear; what we are freed-to is depicted less clearly; ‘neither in sensibility, nor imagination, nor intellect, nor in an activity (whether writing or painting or an art)’ of any sort’ can any *ad quem* be affirmed (*DDI* II, 1, 94).

rather than interdetermining, terms. Thus, in 1440, we read that not only in the domains of aesthetics and *ratio*, but even ‘in theological matters,’ and in the scope of *intellectus*, ‘negations are true and affirmations are inadequate.’¹⁶ In and through this recognition, a theological truth ‘shines forth incomprehensibly within the darkness of our ignorance.’ This truth is nothing other than ‘the learned ignorance that we have been seeking.’¹⁷ In *DDI II*, Cusa depicts this not-knowing in even more apophatic terms; ‘we cannot understand how it is that God can be made manifest to us through visible creatures,’ as ‘[God is] not [manifest] analogously to our intellect’ or to any finite determination, whether a material or a formal object. Even ‘our intellect,’ as soon as ‘it commences to think,’ cannot but ‘assume form.’ As such, the mind generates ‘signs’ or concepts, that render finite and particular its originary infinity or indeterminacy. As such, the mind apparently offers a disanalogy rather than an analogy, as God as such, unlike the mind, ‘neither assumes another form nor appears through positive signs.’¹⁸ As Cusa puts the point; through such reasoning ‘we see that...God cannot be comprehended; this is learned ignorance.’¹⁹

¹⁶ *DDI I*, 26, 89. One might even imagine a certain tension between ‘true theology,’ the truth that theology would establish, and the respective truth of religious practice. At *DDI I*, 26, 86, Cusa admits that ‘every religion, in its worship, must mount upward by means of affirmative theology,’ and a determinate conception of God as, e.g., ‘one and three, most Wise, Inaccessible Light,’ etc. However, we proceed ‘more truly [instead] through learned ignorance,’ by means of which we possess a ‘theology of negation.’ Only by the subtraction or withdrawal of affirmations in the latter are we saved from the ‘idolatry’ of the finite concepts of *fides or ratio* (*DDI I*, 25, 84). For Cusa, ‘we speak of God more truly through removal and negation – as [teaches] the greatest Dionysius, who did not believe that God is either Truth or Understanding or Light or anything which can be spoken of’ (*DDI I*, 26, 86). For Cusa, ‘all the Wise follow Dionysius’ into this unknowing, ‘according to which God is only infinite; neither Father nor Son nor Holy Spirit’ and ‘neither Begetting, Begotten, nor Preceding.’ (*DDI I*, 26, 87). In this way, through Cusa’s *docta ignorantia*, ‘our understanding of God draws near to nothing rather than something’ while our worship of God would draw nearer to something rather than nothing (*DDI I*, 17, 51).

¹⁷ *DDI I*, 26, 89.

¹⁸ *DDI II*, 2, 103.

¹⁹ *DDI III*, 11, 245. The relation between Cusa’s apophatic denial of, and his more kataphatic assertions of, such an *analogia mentis* – both in this early text (see note 20) and in subsequent texts (see below) – is not clear. The appartenance of the *analogia mentis* itself to a Platonic tradition, however, is clear. Cusa resolves that ‘a [Platonic] world-soul must be regarded as a certain universal form which enfolds within itself all forms’ and as such provides a theological basis for an *analogia mentis*. Just as in the divine mind, so in the case of the human mind, ‘the forms in the created intellectual nature’ are both produced from the intellect, *qua* source, and ‘are the intellect’ – both active and passive, determining and determined, prior and posterior, at the same time and in the same subject (*DDI II*, 9, 150). Both the human and the divine mind possess a formally similar relation of ‘*unio sive connexio*,’ between ground and manifestation (*DDI I*, 10, 28). Both propose, isomorphically, a tri-unity of ‘Begetter, Begotten, and the Union of both’ (*DDI I*, 24, 80-81). It is thus the *analogia mentis* of ‘the Platonists’ that affords a basis – in spite of, and in unresolved tension with Cusa’s kataphatic language above – for thinking the unity of an invisible origin and a visible image thereof in the life of the mind as an *imago Dei*, on the way to thinking the otherwise paradoxical and scandalous relation between the ‘visible image’ and the ‘invisible God’ in the final, specifically theological case. I have discussed the importance of Paul’s expression to the *De Quaerendo Deum* in “Nicholas of Cusa,” in

Through this latter teaching, we recognize not only that ‘we are forbidden to touch [God] with the nature of our animality’ or perception, but also that ‘when we attempt to view’ [God] ‘with our intellectual eye,’ too, ‘we fall into an obscuring mist.’²⁰ The point is not only that here, ‘God...is comprehensible only above all understanding,’ or *ratio*, but that this comprehension ‘cannot be conveyed by any sign,’ or signification.²¹ To signify is to falsify; any image is an idol. We abandon not only ‘perceptible things,’ but images of each type, in any type of exchange, perceptual or rational, with its invisible and unknowable ground.²² In this principally and predominantly apophatic way, Cusa suggests in 1440, we can comprehend why, and how, ‘all our wisest and most divine teachers agree that visible things are truly images of invisible things.’²³

Cusa’s reflection on the identity of, and relation between, ‘our wisest and most divine teachers,’ too, is preliminary. The theme of Cusa’s own relations thereto, constructive or critical, also remains relatively undetermined. Yet, Cusa does distinguish between ‘Platonists’ and ‘Peripatetics.’²⁴ He differentiates the ‘formal’ concern of the former with the concern for ‘efficient cause’ or causality that defines the latter. Cusa credits ‘the Platonists’ for an analogy between the ‘Divine Mind’ and the ‘rational soul,’ and suggests that ‘many Christians consented to this Platonic approach.’²⁵ While ‘the Platonists spoke quite keenly and sensibly’ regarding this analogy, they were ‘reproached, unreasonably perhaps, by Aristotle, who endeavored to refute them with a covering of words rather than with deep discernment.’²⁶ On this and other foundational issues, ‘[the Peripatetics] are surely wrong.’ He is willing also to suggest that Aristotle, ‘by refuting his predecessors, wanted to appear as someone without parallel,’ and that ‘the Platonist Aurelius Augustine’ regarding ‘the soul, its immortality, and other very deep matters,’ takes his place in a history of Christian Platonism that is only praised²⁷ Within this latter tradition, however, Cusa

The Spiritual Senses in Christian Tradition, Sarah Coakley and Pavel Gavrilyuk, eds. (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 210-23.

²⁰ *DDI*, III, II, 246.

²¹ *DDI* III, 10, 243.

²² *DDI* III, II, 251.

²³ *DDI* I, II, 30. This is not to say that there is no correlative kataphatic moment in *DDI*, but that the latter remains less developed and less than fully clarified. Cusa determines this originary absence in positive, even trinitarian language; he depicts the ‘unity of understanding’ or faculty of cognition as a tri-unity, composed in Augustinian fashion of ‘that which understands, that which is understandable,’ or understood, ‘and the act of understanding’ (See *DDI* I, 10, 28). He even argues that ‘whoever does not attain’ to the three-fold character of this unity - as a dialectical *unio sive connexio* [*ibid*] - ‘does not rightly conceive’ of it at all (*ibid*). But the predominant tone of his early account and language in *DI* is negative. Even when positive, the account herein is not wholly resolved. The full dialectical development of the relations of interdependence and exchange of *principium* and *principiatum*, at each of the three levels of cognition, remains to be established.

²⁴ *DDI* II, 8, 133-35.

²⁵ *DDI* II, 9, 142-45.

²⁶ *DDI* II, 9, 148.

²⁷ *DDI* I, II, 32. Cusa attributes to ‘the Platonists’ the doctrine of learned ignorance, that ‘the truth of forms is attained only through the intellect,’ and that ‘through reason, imagination, and sense, nothing but images [are attained]’ (*DDI* II, 9, 144). See Graziella Federici Vescovini, ‘Temi ermetico-neoplatonici della *Dotta ignorantia*

suggests that 'the greatest seeker of God' is 'Dionysius the Areopagite' (*ibid*). In this way, such second-order reflection is quickly returned to the task of the self-delimitation of our knowledge, and the *docta ignorantia*²⁸: Dionysius is greatest, in part, because he recognized that 'God is above all affirmation, is beyond all things, and is above the negation of all things,' including 'every mind and all intelligence.' In this way, Dionysius is inscribed as the standard of all true theology: 'Dionysius endeavored to show in many ways that God can be found only through learned ignorance.'²⁹ The tradition of 'true theology,' its proponents and opponents, is not – yet – further determined.³⁰

Already in *De Coniecturis*, from 1441-42, the apophaticism of Cusa's earliest theory of knowledge is amended: an increasingly kataphatic tone is evident already in its first

di Cusano,' in *Il neoplatonismo nel Rinascimento*, Pietro Prini, ed. (Roma 1993), 117-132.

²⁸ On the idea of a *docta ignorantia*, see Graziella Federici Vescovini, 'La 'dotta ignoranza' di Cusano e San Bonaventura,' in *Doctor Seraphicus*, v. 40-41, 1993-94, 49-68. See also Hubert Benz, 'Der (neu)platonische Aufstiegsgedanke bei Bonaventura und Nikolaus von Kues,' *Wissenschaft und Weisheit: Franziskanische Studien zu Theologie, Philosophie und Geschichte*, v. 64, 2001, 95-128.

²⁹ *DDI* I, 16, 44.

³⁰ On Cusa's neo-Platonism, I have benefited, during the preparation of this article, from consulting *Nikolaus von Kues in der Geschichte des Platonismus*, Klaus Reinhardt and Harald Schwaetzer, eds. (Regensburg, S. Roderer Verlag, 2007). I have also appreciated the work of Maurice de Gandillac, 'Platonisme et Aristotelisme chez Nicolas de Cues,' in *Platon et Aristote à la Renaissance* (Paris Vrin 1976), 7-23 and 'Neoplatonism and Christian Thought in the Fifteenth Century: Nicholas of Cusa and Marsilio Ficino,' in *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, Dominic J. O'Meara, ed. (Albany, N.Y., 1982), 143-68. Claudia D'Amico, 'Die Produktivität der *visio absoluta* bei Cusanus: die Vorgänger im mittelalterlichen Neuplatonismus,' in '*Videre et videri coincidunt*,' *Theorien des Sehens in der ersten Hälfte des 15. Jahrhunderts*, Schneider, Schwaetzer, de Mey, Bocken, eds. (Münster, Aschendorff Verlag, 2011), 97-110; D. F. Duclow, "Nicholas of Cusa's Conjectural Neoplatonism," in *On Cultural Ontology: Religion, Philosophy and Culture*, I. Bocken et al. (eds.), Maastricht: Uitgeverij Shaker, 2002, 71-87; A. Eisenkopf, 'Thinking between *quies* and *motus*. (Neo-)platonistic implications and their usage as epistemological concepts in the *Triologus de possess*,' in J.M. Machetta, C. D'Amico (eds.) *El problema del conocimiento en Nicolas de Cus: genealogia y proyeccion*, pp 141-55 (Buenos Aires, Editorial Biblios., 2005); Markus L. Führer, 'Cusanus Platonicus: References to the Term 'Platonici' in Nicholas of Cusa,' in *The Platonic Tradition in the Middle Ages. A Doxographic Approach*, Stephen Gersh and Maarten J.F.M. Hoenen (Berlin, de Gruyter, 2002), pp 346-367. Eugenio Garin, 'Cusano e i platonici italiani del quattrocento,' in *Nicolò da Cusa*, Giuseppe Flores D'Arcais, ed. (Firenze 1962), pp. 75-100; Stephen Gersh, "Medieval Platonic Theology: Nicholas of Cusa as Summation and Singularity," in *The Rebirth of Platonic Theology*, James Hankins and Fabrizio Meroi, eds. (Firenze: Olschki, 2013), 15-46, Johannes Hirschberger, 'Das Platon-Bild bei Nikolaus von Kues,' in *Nicolò Cusano agli inizi del mondo moderno* (Firenze 1970), pp. 113-135, William J. Hoye, 'The Meaning of Neoplatonism in the Thought of Nicholas of Cusa,' *Downside Review* 104 (1986), 10-18; Agnieszka Kijewska, 'Idiota de mente': Cusanus' Position in the Debate between Aristotelianism and Platonism,' in *Nicholas of Cusa on the Self and Self-Consciousness* Walter Andreas Euler, Ylva Gustafsson, Iris Wikström, eds. (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2010), 67-88; Erhard Platzeck, 'Platonische Grundgedanken in der *analogia trinitatis* des Nikolaus von Kues,' in *Franziskanische Studien* 35, 1953, 430-39.

paragraphs. Cusa begins by recalling ‘my previous books of *Learned Ignorance*,’ and promises that, in *De coniecturis*, ‘we will come to understand this matter [of the nature and limits of knowledge] more clearly.’³¹ Cusa emphasizes the novelty of, and in, this work; its ‘new thoughts.’ This novelty, its ‘disclosure of concealed points,’ will afford ‘an elevation to things unknown’ through a ‘rational progression.’³²

Here, too, Cusa utilizes a three-fold structure to depict the faculty of cognition; he names a ‘lowest’ sphere of perception, a ‘middle’ sphere of reason, and a ‘highest’ sphere of the intellect as the ‘three regions’ of cognitive endeavor.³³ Cusa begins by depicting ‘the fruitfulness of...Nature’ and the way in which the ‘human mind partakes of it’ cognitively.³⁴ In this context, he first suggests that ‘all perception,’ as defines the first sphere, ‘arises as a result of encountering an obstacle,’ and as a function of the latter’s ‘resistance.’³⁵ Perception thus generates presence.³⁶ On this basis, ‘imagination proceeds, beyond the contractedness of the senses’ with respect to formal designations of such objectivities, and produces ‘quantity of mass, time, shape, and place.’ As such, imagination ‘embraces what is absent, even though it does not pass beyond the genus of perceptible objects.’³⁷ Imagination is here conceived as a ‘higher perceptual part’ of the soul, that both ‘creates likenesses or images of perceptible objects,’ and ‘thereafter conserves them in Memory.’³⁸ Thus, as a result of its formality ‘reason surpasses the imagination.’ Reason, as defines the second sphere of cognition, ‘produces from itself...rational entities,’ the ideas, concepts, and judgments of mental life, ‘as the likeness of real entities,’ as representations of material phenomena.³⁹ And yet, precisely for the objective character of this formality, ‘the intellect’ can incorporate within itself reason’s unity in a way that reason itself cannot.

³¹ DC I, i.

³² DC I, 3-4. On the DC in particular, I have appreciated J. Koch, *Die ars coniecturalis des Nikolaus von Kues* (Cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1956), Clyde Lee Miller, ‘Perception, Conjecture, and Dialectic in Nicholas of Cusa,’ *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, v. lxiv, Winter 1990, n. 1, pp. 35-54, and S. Oide, ‘Ueber die Grundlagen der cusanischen Konjekturenlehre,’ *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeitraege der Cusanus-Gesellschaft* 8 (1970): 147-78.

³³ DC II, 14, 140.

³⁴ DC I, 4.

³⁵ DC II, 14, 141.

³⁶ The perceptual object is depicted first as ‘the end of the outflow of elements,’ the result of the objective activity of both sensibility and understanding. But it is also ‘the beginning of their return-flow,’ the point from which a mystical ascent begins. (DC II, 5, 96). On the question of a development in Cusa’s aesthetics in *DDI* and *DC*, I have found helpful F. Edward Cranz, *Nicholas of Cusa and the Renaissance*, (Ashgate, Aldershot, 2000), ‘Development in Cusanus ?,’ 6-9, 24-25.

³⁷ DC II, 14, 141.

³⁸ DC II, 14, 145. On the systematic place of imagination in Cusa’s theory of knowledge, see Harald Schwaetzer, ‘Die methodische Begründung der Cusanischen Symbolphilosophie: Zum systematischen Verhaeltnis von *imaginatio* und *visio*,’ in *Intellectus und Imaginatio: Aspekte geistiger und sinnlicher Erkenntnis bei Nicolaus Cusanus* (Amsterdam, Gruener, 2006), pp 83-95.

³⁹ DC I, 1, 5

Cusa declares as ‘marvelous’ the way in which ‘the discriminating power is conducted, progressively, from the center of the senses upwards unto the very lofty intellectual nature!’⁴⁰ This progress is effected ‘by means of certain gradations,’ and incorporates rather than excludes the sensorium, and the series of *termini ad quem* depicted above: it proceeds from sensibility ‘unto the repository of the rational power,’ and from there ‘to the very lofty order of intellectual power,’ understood as an *imago Dei*. In the latter moment, we move ‘to the boundless sea by means of a Stream’ - rather than remaining trapped, necessarily, downstream from this source (*ibid*). The point of this retelling is to show that while the structure and elements of this account of the nature of knowledge is consistent with *DDI*, the value of its variables has shifted. In *DC*, Cusa’s three structural levels of objectivity are each depicted positively in terms of an essential ingredience of an objective correlate.⁴¹ The result is a faculty of cognition thoroughly integrated into the process of ascent, at each of its levels and in each of its functions.

This is no less true at the level of reason. The basic concept of mind remains that of a ground or source that is able to ‘unfold beings from itself,’ intellectually, to ‘bring forth all things from out of the power of its center’ and to determine itself thus.⁴² It is only ‘by means of a ...likeness of itself that is elicited from itself’ that ‘the mind contemplates, by means of a natural and proper image [of itself], its own oneness, its being’ and its threefold composition.⁴³ The mind’s grasp of its positivity allows it to ‘see itself as a triunity,’ as at once the source, activity, and result of understanding. Cusa stresses the significance of this positivity; ‘if reason is removed, none of these [three elements] will remain.’ It is through the former that the enumeration of the latter is accomplished; reason’s images are not rejected as idols but are recognized as icons, insofar as they point beyond themselves to the supersession, or self-overcoming, of reason.⁴⁴

Even in its most basic activity, then, the mind is now, clearly and unproblematically, ‘an image of the Omnipotent Form.’ In this way, the mind qua source is not lost to indeterminacy, as in *DDI*, but is gained; ‘the mind contemplates itself in and through the world unfolded from itself.’ The mind thus employs positively its own productivity as a means for the comprehension of that which remained in an

⁴⁰ *DC* II, 14, 142.

⁴¹ *DC* I, 12, 61. ‘Perceptual sight’ is here not to be abandoned, but is rather to be integrated and utilized in the progress of a mystical ascent; ‘the intellect descends unto the senses because what is perceptual ascends unto the intellect,’ while ‘what-is-perceptual ascends unto the intellect because the intellect descends unto it.’ (para 157, p 243). Cf ‘the intellect takes its starting point from things perceptual,’ (para 167, p 248) and incorporates this beginning unto the ‘ultimate perfection of the intellect’ (para 167, p 249). I risk overemphasizing the discontinuity and underemphasizing the continuity between *DDI* and *DC* in order to recognize the basis for affirming, even before *ADI* (or the *Idiota* dialogues), the positive significance of sensibility in the basic structure of Cusa’s theory of knowledge and knowledge of God (against Wenck’s charge that Cusa’s aesthetics and theology is necessarily a (world-denying, heretical) Eckhartian *Abgeschiedenheit*. (See K.M. Ziebart (*Nicolaus Cusanus on Faith and the Intellect: A Case Study in 15th-Century Fides-Ratio Controversy* [Brill, Leiden, 2014]), 131, n. 357.)

⁴² *DC* II, 14, 144.

⁴³ *DC* I, 4, 12.

⁴⁴ *DC* I, 1, 6.

obscuring darkness in *DDI*.⁴⁵ For Cusa, ‘there can be no [rational] question about the intellect,⁵ and in fact no rational activity at all, ‘in which the intellect does not shine forth in the manner of a presupposition,’ positively, as an illuminating presence rather than a darkened absence.⁴⁶ The latter presupposition possesses the positive character of a quiddity; this ‘intellectual quiddity’ is ‘that upon which the quiddity of reason is dependent.’ While invisible to reason, it is nonetheless ‘present in, and presupposed by, reason.’⁴⁷ In this way, a content that Cusa had eschewed he now appropriates, and employs; ‘reason is intellect’s word, in which word intellect shines forth as in an image.’⁴⁸

The respective capacities of *ratio* and *intellectus* have not shifted, of course; both retain their previous nature and limits. The images of the former, however, once dismissed as derivative, are now retained, and made effective, by the latter. Cusa is aware that this account of the nature of knowledge is distinct from that from 1440; ‘in points previously set forth regarding learned ignorance...I spoke of God in an intellectual way,’ while ‘now, in what was just set forth, I have explained my intent in a divine way.’⁴⁹ For this reason, Cusa exhorts his reader in conclusion as he did in the Introduction; ‘do not ignore these points....in order that you may conceive of the partaking of the Divine Light’ not only by intellect, but also ‘by reason’ and ‘by the senses.’⁵⁰

In this context, Cusa worries about unnamed ‘modern theologians,’ who approach theology through *ratio* rather than *intellectus*; ‘when we rational human beings speak of God, we subject God,’ as if by a natural illusion, ‘to the rules of reason.’⁵¹ In doing so, in remaining within the confines of sensible and rational images, ‘we affirm some things of God and deny other things of Him,’ according to reason’s nature and limits. In particular, we ‘apply diametrical contradictories to Him disjunctively.’ Indeed, ‘this is the method of almost all modern theologians, who speak of God in terms of reason.’⁵² Only *intellectus*, then, can affirm ‘that (1) Unity-that-is-Trinity is to be understood above all enfolding and unfolding,’ as a unity of identity and difference, and that for this reason ‘(2) God cannot be conceived [rationally] as He is,’ as such a unity. The ‘method of reason’ instead ‘elevates what is perceptible to [the level of] reason,’ allowing the former to establish the rule for the latter, and then misapplies the rule of reason to the domain of the intellect.⁵³ The method of learned ignorance,

⁴⁵ *DC* I, 1, 5.

⁴⁶ *DC* I, 6, 24. In *DC*, this cycle is positive rather than negative; each of the three domains interpenetrate. The ‘senses return unto reason, reason returns unto intelligence, intelligence returns unto God, where Beginning and Consummation exist in perfect reciprocity.’ In this way, an analysis of our sensibility, or aesthetic judgment, allows us to ‘arrive at intelligence, and through intelligence, to arrive at God’ (*DC* I, 8, 36).

⁴⁷ *DC* I, 6, 24.

⁴⁸ *DC* I, 6, 25.

⁴⁹ *DC* I, 6, 24.

⁵⁰ *DC* II, 17, 178.

⁵¹ *DC* I, 8, 34. For the *analogia entis* in the *DC*, see Rudolf Haubst, ‘Nikolaus von Kues und die *analogia entis*,’ in *Die Metaphysik im Mittelalter. Ihr Ursprung und ihre Bedeutung (Vorträge des II. Internationalen Kongresses für mittelalterliche Philosophie, Köln 31.8-6.9. 1961)*, Paul Wilpert, ed., (Berlin, de Gruyter, 1963), 686-695.

⁵² *DC* I, 8, 34.

⁵³ *DC* I, 8, 35. On the question of Cusa’s method, I have benefited from; Enrico Berti, ‘Coincidentia oppositorum e contraddizione nel de docta ignorantia I, I-6,’ in

instead, elevates reason to the level of the intellect, and allows the latter to provide the rule for the former, by allowing the latter to instruct the former: it is 'only this negative knowledge' of a *docta ignorantia* that 'teaches you in these points.'⁵⁴ Importantly, such 'hidden truths' are 'attained above reason' rather than by reason, and 'by intellect alone.' The latter 'enfolds opposites' - the mind's identity and its (internal) difference, its subjective and objective, active and passive elements, 'into a unity.' The latter informs the faculty of cognition not only by instructing reason regarding its limits, negatively, but also by preparing us, positively, for a comprehension of the *coincidentia oppositorum* that is God insofar as a 'visible image of an invisible God.'⁵⁵

Concordia Discors. Studi su Niccolò Cusano e L'umanesimo europeo offerti a Giovanni Santinello (Festschrift for G. Santinello). XLV (Padova 1993), pp. 107-128; K. Flasch, 'Docta ignorantia und negative Theologie,' in *Nicolai de Cusa opera Omnia. Symposium zum Abschluß der Heidelberger Akademie-Ausgabe*, Werner Beierwaltes und Hans Gerhard Senger, eds. (Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag Winter, 2006), pp. 79-100; Klaus Jacobi, 'Die Methode der Cusanischen Philosophie,' *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft* 8, Rudolf Haubst, ed., (1970), 255-267; Christian Kiening, "'Gradus visionis". Reflexion des Sehens in der cusanischen Philosophie,' *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft* 19 (1991), Rudolf Haubst and Klaus Reinhardt, eds., 243-272.

⁵⁴ DC I, 10, 50. Cusa worries that 'rationalistic theologians' and rationalistic theology, 'have hitherto, in their affirming of a First Beginning, foreclosed...the way to enter into these [hidden truths].' The rationalist position of a First Cause, posited according to the nature and limits of reason in accord with the nature of causality, is able to think of this *principium* only through the empirical concept of causality, and not as an essential unity of visible and invisible (*ibid*). Cusa worries, then, that the 'method' and 'concept' of God in an *analogia mentis* (and a *theologia revelata*) is superseded by that of an *analogia entis* (and its *theologia rationalis*).

⁵⁵ DC I, 10, 53. See note 19, above. I would suggest that this apparently accumulative, rather than renunciative, progression of *DDI* can contextualize the *CD*'s account of the way that 'the form of the sensible world ascends unto reason and unto the intellect' to then 'attain its end in God' On this basis of *DC*, Cusa was able in 1445, and in the *De Quaerendo Deum*, to depict three "stages" of vision in equally positive terms. These are, as above, (1) intuitive (or sensible) vision, (2) imaginative vision, the vision of reason, and (3) intellective, or intellectual vision. There, too, Cusa began with intuitive or sensible vision, the vision of the physical eye; there, too, he supposed that "our [sensible] vision results from the nature and operation of our cognitive faculty, and the way in which an external object is "taken up into consciousness," from the five external senses. He supposes that consciousness itself, *qua ratio*, is in a second moment 'taken up' into the dialectical 'vision' of *intellectus*, and that the mind is able to establish itself thus as an *imago Dei*. In this way, it is the structure of *DDI*, but the dynamics of *DC*, that accounts for the Cusa's reference to *DQD* at *ADI* 13. Importantly, Cusa at *ADI* 11 had just written of the way in which, through learned ignorance, one can 'realize that an image is an image of an exemplar,' and thus 'leap beyond the image' in order to determine a pre-conceptual space prohibited to reason's objectification. He had just written also that this insight is preparatory to the comprehension of the way in which 'God shines forth in creatures as the truth shines forth in an image,' employing the metaphor, or analogy, of immunating light prominent in *DC* rather than the enveloping darkness prominent in *DDI*. This was depicted as an 'incomprehensible glimpsing, as in the manner of a momentary rapture, just as we momentarily but incomprehensibly glimpse the brightness of the sun with the bodily eye' (*ADI* 12).

The increased positivity of Cusa's account of the dialectical relations of interdependence and interdetermination between original and image (aesthetic, rational, and intellective) is a salient aspect of his early development. But this development obtains *within* the basic structure of Cusa's aesthetics and theology. It could not, and did not, resolve any discordance *between* Cusa's theology and that of his opponent in the *Apologia*, Johannes Wenck. The latter read the *DDI* not in light of the above development within Cusa's theory of knowledge,⁵⁶ but in light of his own, contravening, principles and positions. Interestingly, the principal preoccupations of Cusa's earliest work (the quasi-mathematical 'Absolute Maximum,' of Book I, the quasi-astronomical ' ' of Book II - that, even for Cusanus, yield only 'distant analogies' and 'remote likenesses' to the ultimate object of his concern⁵⁷) are of only derivative significance both to Wenck's critique, and Cusa's self-defense in 1449. Their debate, or diatribe, turns, instead, for both, on the nature of knowledge, and thus the nature (and limits) of our knowledge of God.

In *De Ignota Litteratura*, Wenck, only 'recently presented with *Learned Ignorance...*' reports feeling 'called upon to oppose' the latter, as 'incompatible with our faith, offensive to devout minds, and [as] vainly leading away from obedience to God (*fidei nostre dissona, piarum mencium offensive, nec non ab obsequio divino vaniter abductiva...*.'⁵⁸ He defends this faith by defending instead a certain theory of knowledge. He turns immediately to Cusa's claim to 'transcend truths humanly knowable' through reason, and argues that "in this life it is impossible for man to comprehend in any other way than comprehensibly and in terms of an image."⁵⁹ Wenck suggests that 'the image is to the intellect that which color is to sight' (*hoc sit phantasma ad intellectum quod color est ad visum*) For Wenck, 'it is evident that without the objectively activating light of color, sight cannot see anything,' and that 'neither does [or can] it happen that we [may] understand without an image...' as Cusa has attempted to teach. This argument follows 'from *De Anima* III' (and from Aquinas' use thereof). By its means, theology will be established in accordance with sound Aristotelian principle: (i) "the understanding will not be separated from a component of the material determination of knowledge."⁶⁰ In this way, too, of course, Cusa's path of ascent will not be able to begin.

Cusa's theological error, in Wenck's view, is supported and sustained by an epistemological error. Wenck argues also that the quiddity or essence of a thing "is

⁵⁶ For Cusa, Wenck 'seems to have read few things, and not to have understood the things that he did read' (*ADI* 7-8). Whereas Cusa's 'mystical theology leads to a rest and a silence where a vision of the invisible God is granted,' Wenck's 'knowledge' is 'exercised for disputing,' 'looks for a victory of words,' and is 'puffed up,' both ignorant and arrogant. Wenck's engagement of mystical theology 'proposes to hold a dispute' rather than effect such a vision, and thus in quality 'puffs [us] up and arouses [us] to conflict' in both his interpretations and his assertions. Cusa will attempt both to engage and to withdraw from this conflict; he does so first rhetorically, by employing a dialogical form unique to *ADI* that allows him to engage Wenck only indirectly. For an analysis this 'curious narrative conceit,' see K.M. Ziebart, K.M. Ziebart (*Nicolaus Cusanus on Faith and the Intellect: A Case Study in 15th-Century Fides-Ratio Controversy* [Brill, Leiden, 2014]), p. 105 ff.

⁵⁷ *DDI*, II, 5, 210.

⁵⁸ *DIL* 19.

⁵⁹ *DIL* 21.

⁶⁰ *DIL* 29.

the object of the intellect (according to *De Anima* III).” There is, he continues, “a natural movement of the intellect unto it,” unto its objectivity. He worries, then, that “if it were not attained, then this intellectual movement would be without a *terminus ad quem*.’ Consequently, Wenck continues, ‘there would be no end of the motion; and hence the motion would be infinite [or indeterminate] and in vain.’ This, for Wenck, would destroy the intellect’s proper operation...” – rather than open up a supra-conceptual space for the analysis of God’s name.⁶¹ It would separate knowledge both from ‘a component of the material determination of knowledge (according to Book One of Posterior Analytics),’ and separate knowledge, formally, from its formal end, the *terminus ad quem*. For Wenck, “this man [Cusa]” who would open up such a supra-conceptual space through a doctrine of our necessary ignorance – ‘cares little,’ or grants too little authority, ‘for the teachings of Aristotle...’ and thus is led unto his error. Cusa ‘alienates men from the true mode of theologizing.’⁶²

Wenck insists that Cusa’s attempt to depict the nature or *essence* of God should be disciplined by a focus, on neo-Aristotelian principles, of the *existence* of God as cause;

⁶¹ *DIL* 29.

⁶² *DIL* 32. On Cusa’s relation to Aristotelianism in general, and Wenck in particular, I have benefited from the work of Kurt Flasch, who holds that ‘the conflict between Wenck and Cusanus represents a battle regarding philosophical authority,’ and that while ‘Cusanus had spoken of his in *De docta ignorantia* with a diplomatic caution,’ he had nonetheless worked ‘independently of Aristotle’ in his theory of knowledge and knowledge of God. See K. Flasch, ‘Wissen oder Wissen des Nichtwissens – Nikolaus von Kues gegen Johannes Wenck,’ in *Kampfplätze der Philosophie: Große Kontroversen von Augustin bis Voltaire*, Kurt Flasch, ed. (Frankfurt am Main 2008), 227-242. See also Rudolf Haubst, ‘Nikolaus von Kues auf den Spuren des Thomas von Aquin,’ in *Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft* 5 (1965), Rudolf Haubst, ed. (Mainz, Matthias-Gruenewald-Verlag 1965), 15-62 and *Studien zu Nikolaus von Kues und Johannes Wenck, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters* 38 (Muenster, Aschendorff, 1955), ‘Die Rezeption und Wirkungsgeschichte des Thomas von Aquin im XV. Jahrhundert, besonders im Umkreis des Nikolaus von Kues (+1464),’ in *Theologie und Philosophie* 49 (1974), pp. 252-273. I also have appreciated Donald F. Duclow, ‘Mystical Theology and Intellect in Nicholas of Cusa,’ *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 44 (1990), 111-29, for *Cusa and Wenck*, see especially 115-18. For the way that Cusa ‘leaves behind the Aristotelian-Scholastic tradition’ on the relation between possibility and actuality, see Peter J. Casarella, ‘Nicholas of Cusa on the Power of the Possible,’ *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 64.1 (1990): 7-34, and K. Kuhnekath, *Die Philosophie des Johannes Wenck von Herrenberg im Vergleich zu den Lehren des Nikolaus von Kues* (Koeln, University of Koeln Press, 1975). More generally, see André de Muralt, *de Néoplatonisme et Aristotélisme dans la métaphysique médiévale: analogie, causalité, participation* (Paris, Vrin, 1995) and Hans Gerhard Senger, ‘Aristotelismus vs. Platonismus. Zur Konkurrenz von zwei Archetypen der Philosophie im Spätmittelalter,’ in *Aristotelisches Erbe im arabisch-lateinischen Mittelalter: Übersetzungen, Kommentare, Interpretationen*, Albert Zimmermann, ed., *Miscellanea Mediaevalia*; Bd. 18, (Berlin, de Gruyter, 1986) pp. 53-80. Also worth consulting; Maurice de Gandillac, ‘Die aristotelische erste Philosophie nach “De venatione sapientiae,”’ in *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft* 6 (Trier, Paulinus, 1967), Rudolf Haubst, ed., 30-34, and Carlo Giacon, Il “possest” del Cusano e le dottrine aritotelico-tomistiche dell’atto e potenza e dell’essenza ed esistenza, in *Nicolò Cusano agli inizi del mondo moderno* (Firenze 1970), 375-384. On Aquinas and Cusa, see Rudolf Haubst, ‘Thomas von Aquin in der Sicht des Nikolaus von Kues,’ in *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift* 74, 1965, 193-212.

'the supreme and most simple Cause.' Given that 'creatures are God's effect' and that 'an effect bears the likeness of its cause,' then 'God is knowable in a vestige,' as the principle of creation, taken as the effect thereof.⁶³ Cusa's misdirection leads him instead from such reasoning and toward an 'intense darkness': Cusa 'leaves behind all the beauty and comeliness of creatures and vanishes amid thoughts.'⁶⁴ This wandering is not only idle; 'great evils swarm and abound in such learned ignorance.'⁶⁵ Wenck's argument then descends into insinuations and proclamations of heresy, but not until it depicts clearly a series of competitions; over the basic structure of knowledge, over the proper method for the prosecution of knowledge of God, over the character of the concept of God, and over the authorities through whom one may prosecute such theological knowledge.⁶⁶

In his response to Wenck's attack, the *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*, Cusa begins with the injunction from the Psalms (46.10) to 'be still and see that I am God.'⁶⁷ Cusa suggests that, here, 'He commands that our sight be redirected unto Himself.' He argues that such a *visio Dei*, however, could 'not remain in a mere cognitive seeing, which puffs us up.' We are first to see that 'God is [originally] not this or that,' a determinate objectivity, but rather an 'Ineffable Form, which surpasses every concept.' Cusa writes here that 'whoever desires to ascend unto the divine mode must rise above all imaginable and intelligible modes,' since 'nothing like it [God as Ineffable Form] can appear to our mind.'

The goal of all theological pursuit and comprehension is situated finally within Cusa's account precisely as that which is not, and cannot be, brought fully to presence. But it is also situated as that which is not, and cannot be, alienated or separated from the basic intuitive and intellectual structures which generate all presence. It is through the latter that Cusa is able to depict, and symbolize, the invisible, and unknowable, God. To do so, we must recognize the need for the supersession of the purportedly self-standing images of perceptual and rational vision, as above. Such a recognition, and supersession, Cusa worries, is impossible for those, such as Wenck, unwilling 'to break for a short while with their long-standing habit of laboring with the Aristotelian tradition.'⁶⁸ Cusa worries that 'all who give themselves to the study of theology spend time with certain positive traditions and their forms,' preferred habits of conceptualization. He laments that 'the Aristotelian sect (*Aristotelica secta*) now prevails.'⁶⁹ This sect 'regards as heresy [the method of] the coincidence of opposites,' even though 'the endorsement of this [method] is the

⁶³ *DIL* 27.

⁶⁴ *DIL* 24.

⁶⁵ *DIL* 25.

⁶⁶ *DIL* 25-26; 32-33.

⁶⁷ *ADI* 7. For Cusa's 'clash with Aristotelianism' and the 'neo-Aristotelian Thomist' Wenck, see Dermot Moran, 'Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464): Platonism at the Dawn of Modernity,' in *Platonism at the Origins of Modernity: Studies on Platonism and Early Modern Philosophy*, D. Hedley and S. Hutton eds. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 9-29, p. 15. Moran focuses on the epistemic question involved in 'Wenck's Aristotelian account of knowledge' and its commitment to a phantasm or image, and the rhetorical dynamics of Cusa's 'self-consciously attaching himself to this Platonic tradition' so as to put 'Cusanus' Platonic speculations into the context of late medieval School theology,' (*ibid.*, 26-29).

⁶⁸ *ADI* 1.

⁶⁹ *ADI* 3, 6.

beginning of the ascent unto mystical theology.’ This aversion to mystical theology in the predominant ‘Aristotelian sect’ is not accidental but is necessary to the constitution of this sect; the exclusion of this method (*via*) constitutes the sect and its habits of conceptualization; ‘this method (*via*)...is completely tasteless to those nourished in this sect’ as something not only distinct from but even ‘contrary to their undertaking.’⁷⁰ Cusa worries that the ‘transformation of the sect’ regarding this methodological question ‘would be comparable to a miracle.’ It would require them ‘to reject Aristotle and to leap higher,’ into that which their theory of knowledge cannot reveal or disclose, and that it thus declares unintelligible.⁷¹

Their Aristotelian, and ‘philosophical investigation,’ is limited, or self-limited, to the ‘discursive reasoning’ of *ratio*. This latter ‘is bounded, necessarily, by a *terminus a quo* and a *terminus ad quem*,’ in the terms employed above.⁷² These latter elements, however, are taken as ‘opposed to each other,’ and as ‘contradictories.’ While ‘in the domain of reason [*ratio*] the extremes are separate,’ however, ‘in the domain of the intellect [*intellectus*] we can attain to the unity of these opposites’ (*ibid*). In the latter, the visible image or *ad quem* will be set in relation to the invisible ground, the *a quo*, and both will be determined in their interdependent, and interdetermining, unity. In this context, Cusa refers to the text we treated above; ‘as you were able to read in the books *De Coniecturis*, in which I asserted that God is beyond the coincidence of contradictories,’ Cusa will again suggest that ‘if someone realizes that understanding is in equal measure both a motion and a rest of the intellect (as Augustine says of God in *Confessions*), then he frees himself more easily from other contradictories,’ and

⁷⁰ ADI 6.

⁷¹ Cusa departs from his general examination of the principles of his mystical, and Wenck’s rational, theology, to engage briefly in an interpretive debate with Aquinas over the concept of God in Dionysius. This departure is significant in part for the struggle over authorities that it represents; not only a struggle between Platonic and Aristotelian principles, but between the (mis)use of a canonical figure, Dionysius, in their respective theological traditions. Aquinas, ‘on the basis of [his interpretation of] the words of the great Dionysius,’ names God as ‘the Being of all things,’ and as First Cause. However, to ‘read all the works of the Areopagite’ is to ‘discover in *The Divine Names* that God is the Being of all things in such a way that He is not any of these things.’ This latter [concept of God] ‘cannot be discerned but by learned ignorance’ (ADI 17). Cusa claims the authority of Dionysius’ method and concept of God for his own, mystical theology. In this context, ADI 20 is relevant both to the debate between Platonic and Aristotelian theologies, and to that of the apophatic and kataphatic aspects of Cusa’s own theology. Cusa returns to ‘the Mystical Theology of our Dionysius.’ It ‘instructs us to ascend unto darkness,’ since ‘God is found when all things are left behind.’ Whomever follows this method ‘is regarded as vanishing when he leaves behind all things’ by the Aristotelian Wenck. Cusa does not merely affirm this apophasis, however. He insists, in light of *De Coniecturis*, that one ‘can only *then*,’ thereafter, ‘be carried away...to the place where God dwells,’ by that which ‘exists super-substantially above the objects available to the eyes and senses.’ Cusa’s language becomes more positive; apophasis produces a subsequent appearance. If one ‘hopes to be brought from blindness to light,’ then one must be instructed in this mystical, rather than rational tradition; ‘let him read with discernment the previously mentioned Mystical Theology, Maximus the Monk, High of St. Victor, Robert of Lincoln, John the Scot, the Abbot of Vercelli.’ In this way, ‘he will realize that he has hitherto been blind’ to the limitations of *ratio* and rationalistic theology (and perhaps to the limits of a predominant apophaticism.)

⁷² ADI 15.

prepares himself properly, both conceptually and in terms of his historical sources, for speculative theology.

For this reason, Cusa worries that he should 'beware lest a mystery be communicated to minds bound by the authority that long-standing custom possesses.'⁷³ To such 'men of little understanding,' Cusa declines to offer new or further teachings; 'the saints rightly admonish that intellectual light be withdrawn from those with weak mental eyes.'⁷⁴ Cusa does offer a reading list, of figures and sources in the history of Christian Platonism that for this reason must not be shared with those outside of the 'sect' constituted by the teachings of the *docta ignorantia* and the *coincidentia oppositorum*. This list includes 'Holy Dionysius' books, Marius Victorinus' *Ad Candidum Arrianum*, Theodorus' *Clavis Physicae*, John Scotus Erigena's *Periphyseos*, David of Dinant's books, Brother John of Mossbach's commentaries on the propositions of Proclus, and other such books.' They 'are not at all to be shown to those [with such eyes], those they 'have no knowledge of their blindness,' and thus have 'become rigid in their assertions.'⁷⁵ The mutual opposition in the self-constitution of these 'sects' is thus enforced on principle as well as in practice; the sources (and thus methods and concepts) in terms of which Cusa's Christian Platonism forms and nourishes itself are not only not comprehended by the *Aristotelica secta*, they cannot even be shared with it. Cusa is forced to inscribe himself within a distinct, and more self-consciously defensive, community.

In this essay, I depicted the basic epistemological and methodological structures of Cusa's account of our knowledge, and knowledge of God. In these basic structures lie the problem of the 'names of God,' understood philosophically and theologically. I also depicted, briefly, the historiographical significance of Cusa's theological method and concept of God. In this second acceptance can be found a second aspect of the problem of the 'names of God,' a historiographic aspect of this

⁷³ ADI 6. These passages lead K.M. Ziebart (*Nicolaus Cusanus on Faith and the Intellect: A Case Study in 15th-Century Fides-Ratio Controversy* [Brill, Leiden, 2014]), to conclude that Cusa 'consciously opposed his own doctrines and methods to the scholastic, Aristotelian tradition,' and that 'he believed the pursuit of learned ignorance required the abandonment of this tradition.' She suggests that 'this opinion not only still held, but was strengthened in the coming years [as] is made evident by the series of *Idiota* treatises' which she reads as 'a continuation of the project begun in the first [*Apologia*], as an ongoing rebuttal of Johannes Wenck in particular, and of the academic establishment [of university-Aristotelianism] in particular' (*ibid.*, 124). Ziebart extends her analysis of Cusa's account of Aristotle into the *Sermons* in Part II, p 244 ff. Nonetheless, Ziebart holds not only that (1) 'Aristotelian philosophy in fact plays a central role in Cusan doctrine,' but that (2) 'his characterization as a Platonic thinker needs to be rethought and carefully qualified in light of this fact.' She holds not only that (1) Cusanus' debate with Wenck was to a great extent a debate over Aristotle,' but that, through it, (2) 'Cusanus emerges as a defender of Aristotle' (330; Zeibart even asserts that 'Cusanus' doctrine of learned ignorance has Thomistic roots.'). One can appreciate the truth of (1) in both cases while objecting strongly, again in both cases, to (2).

⁷⁴ ADI 30.

⁷⁵ ADI 29-30. On Cusa's aesthetics, see Santinello, Giovanni, both *Il pensiero di Nicolò Cusano nella sua prospettiva estetica* (Padova 1958), and 'Metafisica e cosmologia estetica nel Cusano,' in *Rivista di Estetica* 3, Torino-Padova 1958, 338-358. See also Harald Schwaetzer, 'La visione dell'invisibile. Una riflessione sull'immagine vivente in Cusano,' in *A caccia dell'infinito. L'umano e la ricerca del divino nell'opera di Nicola Cusano*, Cesare Catà, ed. (Aracne Editori, Roma, 2010), 75-81.

problem. The latter, I suggested, lies in Cusa's recognition and recapitulation of a neo-Platonic theological tradition, and his refusal and rejection (both conceptually and polemically) of a neo-Aristotelian theological tradition. The latter rejection was occasioned, of course, by an attack upon Cusa's account of knowledge and knowledge of God, for its method and for its concept of God. In this way, I would suggest, the specific character of Cusa's neo-Platonism can be understood; even though I have been able to provide only cursory indications of the textual basis for these claims, and this character, *DDI*, as clarified or qualified by *DC*, established the structure of Cusa's theology, and the self-defense of *ADI* established the significance of the same theology, in its specifically neo-Platonic character. A more complete account of Cusa's contested relation to Aristotelian philosophy and theology would incorporate Cusa's later critical engagements of Aristotle; in, for example, the 1458 *De Beryllo*,⁷⁶ the 1462 *De Li Non-Aliud*, and the 1463 *De Venatione Sapientiae*. Similarly, one would need also to integrate a wider range of sources in the 15th-century Plato-Aristotle controversy.⁷⁷ Nonetheless, the significance of this contestation between

⁷⁶ At *DB* 70, Cusa amplifies his critique of Aristotle's account of intellectual form; at *DB* 42, he expands his critique above on the absence of a first dialectical principle, a *coincidentia oppositorum*, in both Aristotle's theory of knowledge and theory of God. At *DLNA* 18 Cusa returns to the theme of 'mental sight,' and to the lack of a first principle (*primum principium*), because of which lack Aristotle 'failed in first philosophy, or mental philosophy' (*DB* 19).

⁷⁷ These include Gemistus Pletho's 1439 'On the Difference of Aristotle from Plato' (*Tractatus de Differentiis Platonis et Aristotelis*), Scholarius' reply, his 1444 'Defence of Aristotle' (*Antilepseis hyper Aristotelous*), George of Trebizond's anti-Platonic 1452 *Comparatio Platonis et Aristotelis* (before Bessarion's more synthetic 1469 'In calumniatorem Platonis'). Zeibart's excellent *Nicolaus Cusanus on Faith and the Intellect* (*ibid*) does not engage this contextual question. Stephen Menn sets out 'varieties of [15th century] anti-Aristotelianism' (including Pico and Pletho but not Cusa) in 'The Intellectual Setting,' in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, v. 1 Garber and Ayers, eds. Cambridge University Press 1998, pp. 33-86, and offers most helpful comments regarding later figures and texts; e.g., Pico's *Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium et veritatis christianae disciplinae*, Juan Luis Vives' *Adversus pseudodialecticos*, Mario Nizolio's *De veris principiis et vera ratione philosophandi contra pseudophilosophos*, Peter Ramus' *Aristotelicae animadversiones*, Francesco Patrizi's *Discussiones peripateticae*, and Gassendi's *Exercitationes paradoxicae adversus Aristoteleos*. (one could add Taurellus' 1596 *Synopsis Matephysicae Aristotelis*). On Pletho, see Nikitas Siniosoglou, *Radical Platonism in Byzantium: Illumination and Utopia in Gemistos Plethon*. (Cambridge University Press, 2011), C. M. Woodhouse, *Gemistos Plethon. The Last of the Hellens* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986), and now Vojtěch Hladký, *The Philosophy of Gemistos Plethon: Platonism in Late Byzantium, between Hellenism and Orthodoxy* (Ashgate, 2014). See also Sebastiano Gentile, 'Giorgio Gemisto Pletone e la sua influenza sull'umanesimo Fiorentino,' in Paolo Viti (ed.), *Firenze e il Concilio del 1439* (Florence, Olschki, 1994) I, 813-32 and George Karamanolis, 'Plethon and Scholarios on Aristotle,' in Katerina Ierodiakonou (ed.) *Byzantine Philosophy and its Ancient Sources* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2002), 253-82. For the relations between Cusa and Bessarion, see John Monfasani, *George of Trebizond. A Biography and a Study of His Rhetoric and Logic* (Leiden, London, 1976), 'Marsilio Ficino and the Plato-Aristotle Controversy,' In *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy* (Brill, Leiden, 2002), pp 179-202, and 'Nicholas of Cusa, the Byzantines and the Greek Language,' in *Nicolaus Cusanus zwischen Deutschland und Italien*, Martin Thurner, ed. (Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 2002), 215-52, 220-23.

Cusa and Wenck,⁷⁸ and the formative role that it had in shaping the specific character of Cusa's neo-Platonism (as well as later developments in modern philosophy of religion and theology), could hardly be overestimated.

⁷⁸ This debate, 'Nikolaus von Kues gegen Johannes Wenck,' was for Flasch 'die letzte grosse Debatte der mittelalterlichen Philosophie' ('Wissen oder Wissen des Nichtwissens-Nikolaus von Kues gegen Johannes Wenck,' *ibid*, 227). For Flasch, the 'Auseinandersetzung Wencks mit Cusanus war auch ein Kampf um philosophische Autoritaeten' (231). This understanding of the debate as intrinsically polemical and political is made more complex by Cesare Catà ('Nicola Cusano una tradizione neoplatonica *abscondita*,' *ibid*); 'strictu sensu, [Cusa] non intende confutare le accuse, ma trasformarle a suo favore, in una revisione fondamentale del concetto di orthodoxia Cristiana' (215). Catà sees in Cusa's *Apologia* no less than "l'aperto e radicale rifiuto di Aristotele e dei suoi seguaci" (216), made in the name of "un Neoplatonismo cristiano filosoficamente alternativo alla concezione aristotelica" (227). For Catà, this alternative conception is "anti-tomista" in particular (243). For an equally anti-Aristotelian reading of Cusa's "rifiuto della metafisica e della logica di Aristotele," both as a theory of mental activity, and as "una teologia come scienza positiva." see Graziella Federici Vescovini, 'La 'dotta ignoranza' di Cusano e San Bonaventura,' in *Doctor Seraphicus*, v. 40-41, 1993-94, pp. 49-68, 53.