

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE WORLD AS THEOPHANY: Nicholas of Cusa's Two Ontological Dimensions

Nicholas of Cusa's stature as a metaphysician is readily discernible from one striking feature: his ability to expound his basic ontological principles in a variety of ingenious modes. Works such as *DI*, *De Coniecturis*, *De Visione Dei*, *De Possest*, and *De Li Non Aliud*, for example, are markedly different in style and approach. Moreover, preliminary examination of the content shows that each of these works is distinctive—without, however, being distinctive in such way as to be fundamentally at odds with the others. That is, no work in the corpus of Cusan writings seems ever to veer fully from the essential ontological principles first laid down in *DI*. If we take this preliminary consideration as a provisional starting point, subject to further confirmation or disconfirmation, then we create a hermeneutical circle: we can use *DI* to cast light upon puzzling passages in a subsequent work; and we can use the subsequent work to illuminate an apparent obscurity in *DI*. Of special interest in this regard is the work *De Dato Patris Luminum*, which has become an exegetical focal point in relation to *DI*. For in accordance with our starting point: what Nicholas means, in *DI*, when he calls God the Essence of all things can be clarified by reference to his doctrine of theophany in *De Dato Patris Luminum*. Of course, if close examination of the two texts were to reveal a fundamental conceptual shift, then our tentative starting point would have to be either qualified or abandoned. Now, Klaus Jacobi is one of

those interpreters who regard *DI* and *De Dato* as compatible treatises;<sup>1</sup> in these works, he judges, Nicholas presents "a new kind of ontology," one which "shatters all traditional notions of philosophy."<sup>2</sup> Though it seems right for us to agree with Jacobi that in some respects Nicholas does present a new kind of ontology, it would be wrong for us to believe that Jacobi has rightly ascertained just what this ontology is. For when we recapitulate his interpretation of *De Dato*, as in Section I below,<sup>3</sup> the discrepancies between this interpretation and Nicholas's text can readily be itemized, as in Section II.

## I

1.1. The central Scripture verse around which *De Dato* is oriented is James 1:17: "Every best gift and every perfect gift is from above, from the Father of lights . . . ." This verse seems to teach, explains Nicholas, that every creature is in a certain way God. For if God, who is the Best, gives only a best gift, He can give only Himself. Since the Best is simple and indivisible, God cannot give Himself partially and diminishedly.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, God's gift does not go to already existing receivers; rather, these very receivers are created by God and are themselves God's gift, because God's giving is His creating. In fact, then, receiver and what is received are identical: God gives to creatures the fact that they are what they are.<sup>5</sup> But Giver and gift also seem identical, since God can give only Himself and only undiminishedly. It seems, therefore, that God and creatures are one and the same thing. According to Nicholas this identity is not merely apparent; indeed, the thesis of identity is *logically entailed* by the premises of his metaphysical system.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, together with advancing this identity thesis, Nicholas also affirms the profoundest difference between creatures and Creator: the self-same thing is God according to the mode of the Giver but is creature according to the mode of

the given. "God is everything which is," says Nicholas. He is Being itself, which is absolutely one; and all being is God's being. Each finite being, insofar as it exists, is God. Yet, a finite being is not the Giver of being but only the receiver thereof: i.e., it is God qua given. In other words, creatures are theophanies; they are God in the mode of manifestation, though they are not God Himself.<sup>7</sup> For though God gives only Himself and though His gift is maximally good, this gift cannot be received as it is given but only by way of a descent. Hence, the Infinite and Absolute is received finitely and contractedly. This finite reception falls short of the truth of God but is nonetheless a likeness of God.<sup>8</sup>

Nicholas's ontological *problématique*, then, is posed by his twofold affirmation: (1) that God gives only Himself and only undiminishedly, so that He is wholly and indivisibly present in His creation; and (2) that the creation is not God, for God is oneness, eternity, and truth, whereas the creation is multiple, temporal, and a likeness.<sup>9</sup> Yet, how can Nicholas consistently assert both of these propositions? As if to answer this question, Nicholas makes a last attempt at clarification:

Because the Eternity which was given was received only contractedly, the beginningless Eternity exists as a received eternity which has a beginning. Therefore, *the world, insofar as in it Eternity is its entire being, has no beginning*. But because in the descent of the world Eternity was received only with a beginning, *the world is not Absolute Eternity but is contracted eternity* that has a beginning. Therefore, the Eternity of the world became an originated eternity, and the eternal world became a created world. *The world which with the Father is eternal and the world which was created through descent from the Father are not two worlds but are one and the same world . . .* So the world is, as it were, the changeable, shadowy God, and the unchangeable and unshadowed world is the eternal God.<sup>10</sup>

We see, then, that Nicholas distinguishes two modes of being of the world: as the world exists in God, it is God and is beginningless; as it exists empirically, it is originated and is the finite mode of being of the Infinite. In this second

mode of being, the world is the contraction of the Absolute, the temporality of the Eternal, the unfolding of Oneness. In short, it is God's "other" mode of being.<sup>11</sup> God, of course, is not a being but is Being itself, the *Being* of beings; similarly, His Eternity is the *Being* of time.

Nicholas's discovery of the twofoldness of the ontological dimensions, and therefore of the duality of the ontologies (i.e., the ontology of identity and the ontology of difference), is the nucleus of the entire Cusan philosophy. It is this new kind of ontology which shatters all traditional notions of philosophy.

1.2. We have seen that, for Nicholas, God's creatures are God's gifts and that these gifts are theophanies, i.e., God's lights, or appearances. The human being is one such theophany. As a knowing *subject*, he recognizes God as the one who reveals Himself in all existing things—i.e., as Being, which in every being is whatever is. Therefore, in all our knowing, God is the one who is known;<sup>12</sup> in other words, all our knowledge is fundamentally knowledge of God.<sup>13</sup> This does not mean that when we have knowledge of earth or air or human being, we know God, who is earth, air, and human being. On the contrary. God is not earth, air, or human being as these exist concretely and empirically; instead, He is Absolute Being and Absolute Quiddity; He is not the form of earth, of air, or of human being; rather, He is the Absolute Form of the form of earth, the form of air, the form of human being.<sup>14</sup> Absolute Quiddity, says Nicholas, can be attained only by way of negation: we know that God is not this and is not that. Yet, in *De Possest* the *via negativa* becomes dialectically transformed into an instrument of reason in order to show that nothing can be denied of God.<sup>15</sup> According to the reasoning in *De Possest* 66-67, *not-being* is the first of all negations. But *not-being* negates only such being as is conceptually its opposite. However, it also presupposes being; and this presupposed being is unnegatable. As Nicholas puts it:

The negation which besets being denies that this being . . . is the presupposed being. This is to say nothing other than that being which is after not-being is not at all eternal, ineffable being . . . . So I see God more truly than the world. For I see the world only negatively and with reference to not-being, as were I to say: "I see that the world is not God." But I see *God before not-being*. Hence, *no being is denied of Him. Therefore, His Being is the entire being of everything which is or in any way can be.*<sup>16</sup>

So the *via negativa* shows, through a dialectical reversal, *that nothing can be denied of God*. It is correct to say "The world is not God" (insofar as the world is created being, existing after not-being); but, for Nicholas, it is not possible to reverse this statement and to say "God is not the world." For God, as Absolute Being, is prior to not-being and to all negation. Thus, the *via negativa* has two phases. In its first phase it negates finite beings in order to approach more closely to knowing what God is not. But in its second phase it negates the negativity of finite beings in order to arrive at their positivity, i.e., at the uncreated mode of being of these same finite beings.<sup>17</sup> A thing, qua existing in God, is God; but it is also everything else from which, qua existing in the world, it is distinct. Accordingly, as a thing exists in its own most congruent eternal being, viz., God, it is most simple Eternity itself.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the *via negativa*, as Nicholas works out its dialectic, corresponds to his view that God and creatures are different modes of being of one and the same thing. For the *via negativa* begins by observing created beings and by denying that God has any such differentiating features as do they. But by a dialectical turning back upon itself, the *via negativa* becomes a *via positiva* which views God as the entire being of everything that is or in any way can be, so that nothing can be denied of Him in whom each thing is Himself and all things.<sup>19</sup> In this manner, the dialectic inherent in the *via negativa* accords with the dialectical relationship which binds together the ontology of identity and the ontology of difference.

1.3. Nicholas teaches that though God manifests Himself in His creation, He is not manifest equally in all creatures. In the Divine Trinity the second member is the *suprema apparitio patris*: the supreme manifestation of the Father. Correspondingly, among creatures, Christ is the highest manifestation of God. For in Christ God is revealed not in otherness but as Himself; in Christ the Absolute qua Absolute has become concrete.<sup>20</sup> Yet, in Christ humanity altogether loses its contractedness and otherness.<sup>21</sup> Combining these two points, we may say: as Christ reveals the concreteness of the Absolute, so He also reveals the absoluteness of the concrete.<sup>22</sup> In and through Christ we recognize that concreteness need not bespeak contractedness and that individual being need not bespeak otherness.<sup>23</sup>

*DI* teaches that Christ is both true God and true man—“*maximum simul absolutum et concretum*.”<sup>24</sup> Christ is God Himself in supreme substantial identity; and He is the difference in which God has expressed Himself. As uniting in Himself eternity and temporality, God and man, Christ unites two modes of being and thereby epitomizes the ontology of identity and the ontology of difference.

1.4. In the end, Nicholas censures traditional ontology, reproaching it for not recognizing that only God *is*, that beings in the world do not exist *simpliciter* but are only manifestations and unfoldings of Being itself.<sup>25</sup> The old ontology was an ontology of difference—one which did not grasp the idea of an ontology of identity. Nicholas's new approach is innovative because it relates, dialectically, the one ontology to the other. But it is also innovative because it restructures the ontology of difference by conceiving of it as a theory of appearance, i.e., as *phenomenology*: the world, for Nicholas, is *apparitio dei*—the manifestation of God.<sup>26</sup>

## II

*Prima facie*, Jacobi's interpretation is certainly appealing. For how could Nicholas, whose works display such philosophical ingenuity, be merely a continuer of the old philosophical traditions? Surely what is new in his philosophy is its dialectical aspect, attended by a self-conscious employment of paradoxical language (even though this language is not altogether innovative, given its roots in Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart). Is not Nicholas's genius to be seen in the fact that he appropriated various traditional motifs, which he then incorporated into a “new kind of ontology” in order to “shatter all traditional ideas of philosophy”? Jacobi wants to persuade us of all this and even more. For, like Walter Schulz, he believes both that Nicholas stands at the threshold of modernity and that Nicholas's new conceptualization revolutionized the intellectual dimensions of its day. Yet, when we enumerate Jacobi's many exegetical errors, we will become aware of how indefensible this historical judgment really is.

2.1. To begin with, Jacobi, like Schulz, fails to take seriously those parts of Nicholas's text that do not serve his purpose. Schulz, we witnessed, minimized or even ignored key words such as “*quasi*” and “*videtur*,” as these appear in *De Visione Dei* 15 and elsewhere. Jacobi does a similar thing when he attempts to comprehend the significance of *De Dato Patris Luminum*. For in this treatise Nicholas states: “It *seems* (*videtur*) that every creature is in a certain way God” and “It *seems* to be the case (*videtur*) that God and the creation are the same thing.”<sup>27</sup> Jacobi, in the present instance, does not ignore the word “*videtur*”; he does something worse: he disavows it! Nicholas, he well sees, does use the word; but what he means, Jacobi assures us, is something much less tentative: it not only *seems* to be the case but it also *must* be the case; for Nicholas's metaphysi-

cal premises *logically entail* the conclusion that God and the creation are one being in two different modes. Of course, Jacobi never tells us where, outside of *De Dato*, this argument is to be found; nor does he either construct or reconstruct it for us; nor does he tell us what to do with such statements as the one in *DI* II, 13 (177:9-10): "*Deus autem non est nisi absolutus*": "God, however, is only absolute."<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, Jacobi surely cannot suppose that the argument occurs in *De Dato* itself; for the only relevant argument we find there is the argument in 2 (97), whose movement is in terms of a threefold occurrence of "*videtur*." Jacobi could not legitimately use this very argument to show that Nicholas means much more than *videtur*, that he means *necesse est*. Moreover, Jacobi ignores the fact that the last two sentences in 2 (97) have their verbs (viz., "*erit*") in the future. Now, as is the case with many medieval authors, Nicholas sometimes employs the future, as here, to substitute for the subjunctive. And in the present context of *videtur*, the subjunctive serves as a reminder that his reasoning up to this point has been contrary to fact.

Though Nicholas is not endorsing the foregoing view, which he rejects as imprecise, there is nonetheless something in it which he regards as approaching a correct understanding of the matter.<sup>29</sup> This correct understanding he states in terms of the language of forms:

The philosophers maintain that it is form which gives being to a thing. But this statement lacks precision; for there does not [first] exist a thing to which a form [then] gives being, since whatever exists exists only through a form. Therefore, there does not exist a thing which takes its being from a form; for, [if there did.] this thing would exist before it existed. Rather, a form gives being to a thing in the following sense: in every existing thing the form *is* the being, so that the very form which gives being *is* the being which is given to the thing. Now, God is the Absolute Form of being; and this is the Apostle's teaching in the passage, for all the being of all things is given by the Father. But the form gives the being. There-

fore, God, because He gives being to all things is the Universal Form of being. Now, because form gives being to every single thing (i.e., the form *is* the being of the thing), God, who gives being, is rightly called by many the Giver of forms. Therefore, God is not the form of earth, of water, of air, of aether, or of any other thing; rather, He is the Absolute Form of the form of earth or of air. Therefore, earth is neither God nor anything else, but is earth; and air is air, aether aether, and man man—each through its own form. For each thing's form is a descent from the Universal Form, so that the form of earth is its own form and not another's—and likewise for the other forms.<sup>30</sup>

This passage is crucial because it contains the view that Nicholas is endorsing and because it purports to state this view precisely. Each thing's form gives being to that thing in the sense that it *is* that thing's being. This means that each thing has its own form, i.e., its own being, which is distinct from the respective form, or being, of other things. Earth and air are distinct from each other; they are also distinct from God in that neither of them is God. Moreover, God is not earth, and God is not air; rather, He is the Form of the form of earth and the Form of the form of air. God is called *Form* because He gives form to each respective thing; and He is called *Universal Form* in order to indicate that He is not the proper form of any existing thing; finally, since in giving form to a thing He gives its being, He may be called *Universal Form of being* or even *Universal Form of being for all forms*.<sup>31</sup> Now, if God is the Universal Form of being and if form not only gives being but is being, then God is the Universal Being of being. But just as He is not the proper form of any existing thing, so He is not the proper being of any existing thing.<sup>32</sup> Earth and air have their own respective being, and this being is not God. That is, *in their own being* they are not God. Similarly, God is not their own being; rather, God is Universal Being, the Being of their being.<sup>33</sup>

What this means is illustrated in *DI* by a symbolism: God's Being is to the respective individualized being of each

existing thing as a reality (e.g., a face) is to different mirror images of itself.<sup>34</sup> Now, mirror images are both distinct from one another and different from one another, because no two images are exactly alike.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, none of the images are the face, and the face is not any of its images. However, the images of the face could not exist if the face did not exist, though the face could exist without its images.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, the images would not be what they are (viz., images of this face) if the face were not what it is—though the identity and essence of the face is unaffected by the identity and essence of the respective image. By comparison, God is present in the world as the reality of the face is present in its images. God is not any object in the world, nor is any object in the world God. The world is the reflection of God, and God is the Reality which the world reflects. But even a reflection qua reflection has its own reality, its own being;<sup>37</sup> still, its reality, qua reflected, is dependent on the reality of the original that it reflects; and these two realities belong to ontologically different dimensions. Though the relationship between God and the world is illustratable by the relationship between an original and its image, it is not fully so, says Nicholas, because in the case of creation there is no preexistent receiving medium:

Created being cannot be anything other than reflection—not a reflection received positively in some other thing but a reflection which is contingently different. Perhaps [a comparison with an artifact is fitting]: if the artifact depended entirely upon the craftsman's idea and did not have any other being than dependent being, the artifact would exist from the craftsman and would be conserved as a result of his influence—analogously to the image of a face in a mirror (with the proviso that before and after [the appearance of the image] the mirror be nothing in and of itself).<sup>38</sup>

So, ultimately speaking, God is the entire being of the world, in that the world owes wholly to God the fact that it exists.<sup>39</sup> And, ultimately speaking, God owes nothing to the world, which confers nothing on Him and which, qua crea-

tion, "does not have even as much being as an accident but is altogether nothing."<sup>40</sup> When not speaking ultimately, Nicholas ascribes to the world its own being, which is relatively—not ultimately—independent. That is, the world's being, though derivative, is derivative *being*; accordingly, the world is neither God nor nothing.<sup>41</sup> Because Nicholas's thought moves on two different levels when he denies, in *DI* II, 2, that the world is nothing and affirms in the very next chapter that it is altogether nothing, he is not contradicting himself. Similarly, when he states at the outset of *DI* I, 8 that God is the being of things<sup>42</sup> and states in *Apologia* 26 that "the individual existence of things through their own forms is not thereby destroyed," there is no inconsistency. To be sure, then, Nicholas's ontology does have two dimensions; but as we shall see more clearly, these are not the two dimensions described by Jacobi.

Jacobi does not quite know what to make of the fact that Nicholas expresses his view in the language of forms. In fact, Jacobi glosses only lightly over *De Dato* 2 (98), preferring to sanction the opinion that here in *De Dato* the language of forms "accords poorly with the real thought of our author."<sup>43</sup> Let us dwell, for a moment, on just how startling Jacobi's method of interpretation is. We have already observed how he transforms Nicholas's phrase "*Videtur igitur quod . . .*" into "*Necesse igitur est quod . . .*" without offering even the slightest evidence for doing so. But now, even more startlingly: the passage in which Nicholas claims to be setting forth his view *precisely* is construed by Jacobi to be a passage which does not express Nicholas's real thought! Ironically, when we glimpse the whole of Jacobi's interpretation of Nicholas's ontology, we recognize that it accords more with the view which Nicholas regarded as imprecise than it does with the view which Nicholas proposes as correct. That is, according to Jacobi, Nicholas's real thought is that "God and the creation are the same thing—according to the mode of the Giver *God*,

according to the mode of the given *the creation*.”<sup>44</sup> Of course, Jacobi knows that Nicholas explicitly says: “Without doubt the foregoing manner of speaking lacks precision”;<sup>45</sup> but Jacobi apparently regards Nicholas as nonetheless believing in his heart that the foregoing manner of speaking really is more or less precise. By contrast, when Nicholas looks into “the correct understanding of the matter” and uses the language of forms, Jacobi regards him as having recourse to a mode of discourse which accords poorly with his real thought—i.e., as recurring to a mode of discourse which imprecisely expresses his position. So, lo and behold, Jacobi’s interpretation actually reverses Nicholas’s text by taking the imprecise for the precise, and the precise for the imprecise! And this reversal is nothing short of hermeneutically astounding.

Of course, there remains an alternative construal of Jacobi’s interpretation. Perhaps what he has in mind is something like the following: ‘Although in *De Dato* 2 (98) Nicholas really does say what he means, and does say it precisely, what he there means does not accord well with what he says and means elsewhere. When we take what he says elsewhere and bring it to bear upon what he says in *De Dato* 2 (98), we see that his real thought is closer to the so-called “imprecisely expressed” view of *De Dato* 2 (97) than to the view stated in the language of forms in *De Dato* 2 (98).’ Now, if this is Jacobi’s point, it too is untenable for the following reason: If *De Dato* is to be compared with any other works, the two most important works, vis-à-vis this comparison, will be *DI* and the *Apologia*.<sup>46</sup> For *De Dato* is a continuation of the topic presented in *DI* II, 2-3; and the *Apologia* refers explicitly to *De Dato*,<sup>47</sup> while nowhere expressing any disagreement with it. Now, when we examine these two works, we see that the language of forms is fundamental to Nicholas’s ontology. Therefore, it is impossible that the language of forms should “accord poorly” with his real thought.

## 2.2. What leads Nicholas to introduce an imprecise view

in order subsequently to correct it? The answer seems clear enough: the imprecise view vividly displays the quandary with which Nicholas wants to deal—namely, how can God, who is Absolute Perfection, create anything which is less than Absolute Perfection? It seems, *prima facie*, that if God is perfect, then the world He creates must also be perfect; and if the created world is perfect, then it must in some sense be God. Nicholas previously took up this same topic in *DI* II, 2, where he wrote: “every existing thing is that which it is, insofar as it is, from Absolute Being.”<sup>48</sup> And the reasoning continues: “But since the Maximum is far distant from envy, it cannot impart diminished being as such.” Unlike in *De Dato*, Nicholas here draws his conclusion straightway: “Therefore, a created thing, which is a derivative being, does not have everything which it is (e.g., [not] its corruptibility, divisibility, imperfection, difference, plurality, and the like) from the eternal, indivisible, most perfect, indistinct, and one Maximum—nor from any positive cause.”<sup>49</sup> This is the same conclusion as the one reached in *De Dato*, where we are told that though God can give only maximal goodness, this goodness can be received only restrictedly: “Therefore, the infinite is received finitely; the universal, singularly; and the absolute, contractedly. But since such a receiving falls short of the truth of the one who is imparting Himself, it turns toward a likeness and an image, so that it is not the truth of the Giver but a likeness of the Giver.”<sup>50</sup> And this passage parallels the one in *DI*: “The Infinite Form is received only finitely, so that every created thing is, as it were, a finite infinity or a created god, so that it exists in the way in which this can best occur. [Everything is] as if the Creator had said, ‘Let it be made,’ and as if because a God (who is eternity itself) could not be made, there was made that which could be made: viz., something as much like God as possible . . . . For the most gracious God imparts being to all things, in the manner in which being can be received.”<sup>51</sup>

Like *DI*, then, *De Dato* also teaches that the world is an

imperfect reception of God's imparting, though God's imparting is perfect. In *De Dato* Nicholas can no more comprehend how the finite arose from the Infinite than he could in *DI*. But in *De Dato* 2 (99) he attempts to render it plausible by the same illustration he used in *DI* II, 3 (111:15-22): viz., the example of different mirrors receiving the image of a face. *De Dato* goes beyond *DI* by adding a number of other illustrations, in the hope of better being able to grasp how that which is illustrated is possible. The illustrations teach that God, who is Universal Form, is related to the forms of created things as (1) light is to color, (2) as the substantial form of Socrates is to one of Socrates' parts (e.g., his hand), (3) as a human soul is to the eye, (4) as substantial form is to quantity, quality, and the other accidents. These illustrations do not teach that the world is the "other" mode of being of God, that the world is the finite mode of being of the Infinite, as Jacobi supposes.<sup>52</sup> True, Nicholas refers to the world as a perceptible god and to a man as a humanified god, just as *DI* called every created thing a created god, *as it were*.<sup>53</sup> But a created god, or a perceptible god, is not God in the mode of appearance, as Jacobi believes;<sup>54</sup> indeed, it is not God at all, because God is never contracted but is always and wholly absolute. Nicholas uses the term "god" in order to emphasize that each thing is as perfect as it can be.<sup>55</sup> In this respect there is a certain parallel between it and God.

In *DI* Nicholas states again and again that only God is absolute and that God is only absolute.<sup>56</sup> Because created things are contracted, they are not God. Indeed, there is an infinite difference between contracted things and God, who is *absolutissimus*.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, "just as the Divine Nature, which is absolutely maximal, cannot be diminished so that it becomes finite and contracted, so neither can the contracted nature become diminished in contraction to the point that it becomes altogether absolute [i.e., altogether free of contraction]."<sup>58</sup> This infinite ontological gulf between God and the world is further insisted upon when

God is said to be the one "*absolute maximum incommunicabile, immersibile et incontractibile ad hoc vel illud*."<sup>59</sup> Hence, the empirical world is not God in the mode of appearance. Now, in *De Dato* Nicholas also rejects the view that God is mingled with the universe, that "God and the creation are the same thing—according to the mode of the Giver God, according to the mode of the given *the creation*."<sup>60</sup> The world *descends* from God and therefore cannot be God. God, says Nicholas in *De Dato*, is "beyond all affirmation and negation, all positing and removing, all opposition, all change and unchangingness."<sup>61</sup> Had Nicholas put forth, in *De Dato*, a position different from that in *DI*, he would have signaled this fact in the *Apologia*, where he was responding to John Wenck's attack on the entire program of learned ignorance. Yet, what we see in the *Apologia* is, rather, a continuation of the line of reasoning which begins in *DI* and runs through *De Dato*.

2.3. Jacobi's *general* misinterpretation of *De Dato* leads him to mistranslate several of Nicholas's Latin sentences which can be disambiguated only relative to a given interpretational context. These translated sentences Jacobi then takes as confirmatory of his overall interpretation. For example, he takes the sentence "*Mundus igitur non habet principium, ut in ipso aeternitas est omne esse eius*" to mean "Therefore, *the world, insofar as in it Eternity is its entire being, has no beginning*."<sup>62</sup> This translation suggests a view which Jacobi himself earlier ascribed to Nicholas: viz., that Eternity is the entire being of each empirical thing, that all being is God's being, that in this way each being, insofar as it exists, is God.<sup>63</sup> Yet, a more accurate translation of the sentence in question would be: "Therefore, the world does not have a beginning insofar as in the Father its entire being is eternity."<sup>64</sup> Nicholas's point is one that is made frequently in *DI*: viz., that in God everything is God. Moreover, though Nicholas maintains that God is all things (in the mode of enfolding),<sup>65</sup> he does not affirm either that all things are God or, *tout court*, that all being is



God's being. Rather, he says (to repeat) that *in God all things are God* and furthermore that God is the *Being of all beings*. These beings—we have already seen—have their own being; and their own being is not God's being, though it derives totally from God.

Let there be no doubt about Jacobi's mistakenness. In *De Dato* 3 Nicholas distinguishes the world as it exists in the Father from the world as it is received "*in esse proprio suo*."<sup>66</sup> As it exists in God, it is God; but as it descends from the Father and is received *in its own being*, it is not God but is "an originated eternity," "a contracted eternity." These are not self-contradictory expressions but are *modi loquendi*, associated with the so-called doctrine of eternal creation, to which Nicholas subscribes. A contracted eternity is not God's eternity, which is absolute and uncontracted.<sup>67</sup> To illustrate the relationship between contracted eternity and God's eternity, Nicholas resorts to an *as if*: the situation is "as if the world were a changeable god, with variation of shadow, and the unchangeable world, without any variation of shadow, were the Eternal God."<sup>68</sup> There is no reason to construe this illustration, which Nicholas calls imprecise, as teaching that the world is God or that God is the world or that both God and the world are different modes-of-being of one and the same reality.

What may be partly responsible for misleading Jacobi is Nicholas's use of the phrase "*contractio aeternitatis*" in *De Dato* 3 (105:8), where the world's descent is spoken of as "a contraction of eternity into duration that has a beginning." Taken by itself, this phrase seems to imply that God's eternity can be delimited. And this implication seems to conduce to the further conclusion that each thing, in its essence, is God. But we need to be as careful with this expression as we are with the statement, in *DI*, that "the one, infinite Form is participated in in different ways by different created things."<sup>69</sup> Though Nicholas says that Infinite Form, i.e., God, is participated in, he also says elsewhere that God cannot be participated in.<sup>70</sup> Taken to-

gether, these statements sound contradictory. But in *De Venatione Sapientiae* we see more clearly what Nicholas means: viz., that God cannot be participated in as He is in Himself, that things participate not in God Himself but in His likeness.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, as God *is* in Himself, He cannot be contracted; rather, God's likeness is contracted (i.e., received in a restricted way). Accordingly, Nicholas agrees with Albert Magnus: "Notice the fact that Truth, which is that which it can be, cannot be participated in; rather, it is communicable in its likeness, which, in accordance with the disposition of the receiver, can be received in greater and lesser degree."<sup>72</sup> Correspondingly, when Nicholas says in *De Dato* that God's gift of His own maximal goodness "cannot be received as it is given,"<sup>73</sup> this is his way of saying that God is not received as He is in Himself. And this statement implies that what is received is a *likeness* of God,<sup>74</sup> just as a mirror image is a received likeness of the original, since "in no [mirror] is the face ever [received] as it is."<sup>75</sup> Now, because the form *received* by a creature *is* that creature's own being, a creature may be said both to *receive* a likeness of God and to *be* a likeness of God. Thus, the expression "a contraction of eternity" signifies a restricted reception of eternity—i.e., a reception of eternity in a manner other than eternity is in itself. This reception is not really eternity but is only temporality; and temporality both *receives* and *is* a likeness of eternity. Moreover, this reception, or being, does not at all affect eternity as it is in itself, so that God's eternity remains unchangeable and indivisible.<sup>76</sup>

To be sure, Nicholas of Cusa is not sufficiently cautious in his use of terms. And this carelessness has conduced to no end of confusion on the part of his interpreters. Still, these interpreters themselves are partly to blame for their incomprehension. For they have disregarded Nicholas's own counsel: "Whoever examines the mind of someone writing on some point ought to read carefully all his writings and ought to resolve [his statements on this point] into

one consistent meaning. For from truncated writings it is easy to find something which by itself seems inconsistent but which when compared with the whole corpus is [seen to be] consistent."<sup>77</sup> It should be clear from a comparison of *DI*, *De Dato*, and the *Apologia* that to call creatures theophanies, created gods, and reflections does not mean, for Nicholas, that creatures are God in His state of "otherness." And to speak of creatures as *apparitiones dei*<sup>78</sup> should not be taken to imply that they are God become visible but to indicate that creatures are *manifestations* of God—*secundum viam negativam*.<sup>79</sup>

2.4. Jacobi, however, not only misunderstands Nicholas's notion of *theophania*,<sup>80</sup> he also misapprehends his doctrine of *via negativa*.<sup>81</sup> Jacobi thinks that, for Nicholas, the *via negativa* passes over into a kind of positivity in which the being that is negated in its finite mode (i.e., qua world) is now attained in its uncreated mode (i.e., qua God). Moreover, he considers Nicholas as illegitimizing the statement "God is not the world," while licensing the statement "The world is not God";<sup>82</sup> for God is "prior to not-being, and so, no being is denied of Him."<sup>83</sup> The first thing to notice about Jacobi's interpretation is that it takes no account of Nicholas's own negations regarding God. For instance, at the end of *De Possest* 12 Nicholas denies that God is the Form of a given thing, since He is the Form for all things. (This very view is also found in the earlier work *De Dato*: God is not the form of earth or the form of air but is the Universal Form for all forms.) Furthermore, in *De Possest* 11-12 Nicholas denies that God is the visible, sensible sun. Why, then, we may begin to wonder, would Nicholas object to the statement "God is not the empirical world"? In fact, Nicholas nowhere explicitly objects to it! Instead, he says only that no being is denied of God, that God is the complete being of all things. And Jacobi draws the inference that "it is not possible for Cusanus . . . to say 'God is not the world'" (p. 157). Yet, what Nicholas means is an extension of his earlier point in *De Possest* 11: "It does

not matter what name you give to God, provided that in the foregoing manner you mentally remove the limits with respect to its possible being." It would be wrong, Nicholas says, to deny that God is the sun; but it would not be wrong to deny that He is the sensible sun. God is all things but only insofar as they are enfolded in Him; as they are empirically unfolded from Him, He is not these things, even though in all unfolded things He is nevertheless present.<sup>84</sup> So, far from repudiating the statement "God is not the empirical world," Nicholas is endorsing it. For since God is beyond not-being insofar as not-being is distinguished from being, no predicates taken from the world of finite things could at all befit Him.

This conclusion brings us to the second notable feature of Jacobi's account: viz., that it fails to stress Nicholas's claim that God is not only beyond not-being but is also beyond being, because in God being and not-being coincide.<sup>85</sup> Were Jacobi consistent in his own reasoning, he would have to conclude that Nicholas rejects both the negation "God is not the world" and the affirmation "God is the soul of the world."<sup>86</sup> Presumably, however, Jacobi would not want to draw this conclusion, since to do so would be flagrantly at odds with Nicholas's text.<sup>87</sup> Thus, Jacobi seems to be left stranded with the inconsistent interpretation which results from his wrongly drawing one conclusion and rightly not drawing another.

Finally, Jacobi fails most of all to recognize that Nicholas's method of negative theology, even as alluded to in *De Possest*, does not turn back on itself dialectically, "*um zur Positivität, d.h. zur ungeschaffenen Seinsweise desselben Seienden zu gelangen*": "in order to attain to the positivity—that is, to the uncreated mode-of-being—of the same [finite] beings" (p. 157). For in Nicholas's recognition that God is Being itself, which is beyond the distinction between being and not-being, no *positivity* is attained. Being itself, Nicholas teaches everywhere, is beyond all conception,<sup>88</sup> beyond all differentiation. Thus, God "remains

completely unknown to all who seek Him by way of reason and intellect."<sup>89</sup> He is encountered "where He is seen in darkness and where it is not known what substance, what thing, or what being He is."<sup>90</sup>

2.5. Jacobi's many confusions culminate, as one might expect, in a misinterpretation of Nicholas's Christology. For Jacobi quotes Nicholas as maintaining that the "Word Himself, which is the Infinite Light of the Father . . . showed Himself sensibly and uncontractedly to us in our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>91</sup> Yet, when we examine the Latin text, we see that Nicholas does *not* maintain (nor could he consistently teach) that the Word reveals Himself *uncontractedly*. Jacobi has simply mistranslated; and it is difficult to know whether the mistranslation arises from a misconception or whether the misconception arises from the mistranslation. What Nicholas actually says is ". . . until such time as the Word that is without contraction revealed itself perceptibly in our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>92</sup> But though the Word is without contraction, it is revealed to us only through Christ's contracted body and soul, i.e., through the contractedness of His human nature, through His words and deeds of love. Jacobi's confusion in this regard is not an isolated instance. Elsewhere he asserts, in Nicholas's name, that "the Absolute as such has become concrete" (p. 159). But Nicholas himself would regard this statement as self-contradictory, for the Absolute *as such* can never become concrete or contracted.<sup>93</sup> In this very same passage Jacobi also says more strongly: "As Christ reveals the concreteness of the Absolute, so [He also reveals] the absoluteness of the concrete." Presumably, by *concreteness* Jacobi means the same thing as *contractedness*, for he quotes Nicholas as saying that Christ is "*maximum simul absolutum et concretum*," when what Nicholas really says is "*maximum quod simul est contractum et absolutum*."<sup>94</sup> Jacobi's substitution here is permissible. But his exegesis runs counter to Nicholas's texts if "concreteness of the Absolute" and "absoluteness of the concrete" signify—as they seem to—that the

absolute *as such* becomes concrete and that the concrete *as such* becomes absolute. Perhaps Jacobi is misled by Nicholas's text because of passages such as the following: "Just as the abstract is in the concrete, so we consider the Absolute Maximum to be antecedently in the contracted maximum, so that it is subsequently in all particulars because it is present absolutely in that which is contractedly all things [viz., in the universe]. For God is the Absolute Quiddity of the world, or universe. But the universe is contracted quiddity."<sup>95</sup> However, though this passage teaches that the Absolute Maximum is present in the contracted maximum (viz., the universe), it does not teach that the Absolute Maximum thereby becomes contracted. By comparison, as things are enfolded in God ontologically prior to their creation, they always *are* God, rather than being their contracted selves;<sup>96</sup> and as unfolded from God they never lose their state of contractedness.

Furthermore, Jacobi supposes that, according to Nicholas, humanity loses, in Christ, all contractedness and otherness (p. 159). However, this interpretation is not quite accurate. For what Nicholas says is much more complex:

With respect to the fact that the humanity of Jesus is considered as contracted to the man Christ, it is likewise understood to be united also with His divinity. As united with the divinity, [the humanity] is fully absolute; [but] as it is considered to be that true man Christ, [the humanity] is contracted, so that Christ is a man through the humanity. And so, Jesus's humanity is as a medium between what is purely absolute and what is purely contracted.<sup>97</sup>

So it is not the case that in Christ humanity loses "*jeden Sinn von Einschränkung und Andersheit*." Jacobi has oversimplified this very important and very problematical doctrine of Nicholas's.<sup>98</sup>

Finally, Jacobi tells us (still on Nicholas's behalf) that in Christ it becomes evident that concreteness need not bespeak contractedness, that individual being need not bespeak otherness (p. 161). However, Nicholas's view is exactly the opposite: concreteness always bespeaks con-

tractedness, and individual being always bespeaks otherness. This view beams forth from all three books of *DI*. We need not, then, be surprised that Jacobi cites no text in support of his discrepant interpretation. But even if Jacobi's construal had been correct, it would not have been consistent with what he stated previously. That is, if in Jesus we are shown that *concreteness* need not bespeak *contractedness*, then Jacobi was earlier wrong in writing "*maximum simul absolutum et concretum*" instead of "*maximum simul absolutum et contractum*."

### III

3.1. So Jacobi's attempt to demonstrate the innovativeness of Nicholas's metaphysics founders. However, its foundering is not a sign that Nicholas's metaphysics is therefore uninnovative. It is rather a sign that Jacobi has failed to comprehend the nature of the innovativeness, with the result that he assigns to Nicholas's texts a meaning diametrically opposed to the point Nicholas is making. Jacobi's interpretation, we have seen, consists of the following theses: (1) One and the same thing is *God* according to the mode of the Giver and is *creature* according to the mode of the given; (2) all being is God's being; and in this way each being, insofar as it exists, is God; in other words, the empirical world is the finite mode-of-being of the Infinite, the contraction of the Absolute, God's "other" mode of being; (3) the *via negativa* turns back on itself dialectically so as to attain the world's positive and uncreated mode of being, viz., God; (4) it would be incoherent with this version of the *via negativa* to say "God is not the empirical world"; (5) in Christ the Word of God has revealed Himself to us uncontractedly; (6) in Christ the Absolute as such became concrete; (7) in Christ humanity loses, in every respect, its contractedness; (8) the Incarnation exhibits the truth that concreteness need not bespeak contractedness. All eight of these theses have been shown to be exegetically false.

Moreover, they are false in such an uncomplex manner that, qua interpretations, they would be rendered unequivocally true by adding to them the prefacing words "It is not the case that . . . ." Accordingly, Jacobi has done Nicholas the injustice of saddling him with a metaphysical theory which runs diametrically counter to his actual doctrines.

3.2. Jacobi's treatment of Nicholas's epistemology is equally objectionable. Since this is not the place to launch a full-scale investigation thereof, let us simply note, in a preliminary fashion, two misdirections. First of all, Jacobi asserts that, for Nicholas, "*in all our knowing God is the one who is known.*"<sup>99</sup> A page later he repeats this claim: "*all our knowledge is, fundamentally, knowledge of God.*"<sup>100</sup> He then qualifies this claim by reminding that Nicholas does not consider God, who is Being itself, to be an *object* of our knowledge in the way that *a being* is an object of our knowledge. This observation leads Jacobi into his discussion of *De Possest* and the *via negativa*. Up to this point Jacobi creates the impression that Nicholas believes the following: viz., that whenever anyone knows anything, this knowledge is, fundamentally, a knowledge of God.<sup>101</sup> In fact, isn't this just what Jacobi has said? But, as if recognizing that this construal of Nicholas is too extreme, he now begins to take it back:

God is not found in the world. Indeed, taken in its otherness and remoteness, the world does not even contain anything analogous to God; God, in His unknowable transcendence, remains far removed from such knowledge of the world . . . .

But although knowledge in the dimension of otherness does not attain unto God, the knowledge of beings within the world can nevertheless conduce to knowing God: viz., when we penetrate the manifoldness and variety of objects and view them as "theophanies," as self-manifestations of God. In this manner nothing other than God—who is the one Truth of all beings—is seen in everything knowable. If God is the one Truth of everything, then the knowledge which recognizes God in everything must negate the otherness of beings qua beings.<sup>102</sup>

That Jacobi's point has changed is beyond doubt; for no

longer is he promoting the interpretation that *in all our knowledge God is the one who is known*. Instead, he is now taking Nicholas to mean only that *it is possible for someone who follows a certain method to see nothing other than God*. That is, Jacobi has switched from saying "*in all unse-rem Erkennen ist also Gott der Erkannte*" (p. 154) to saying "*in allem Erkennbaren wird so nichts anderes als Gott gesehen*" (p. 162), where the German word "*so*" makes a crucial difference. The outcome, then, is curious: though Jacobi begins with a false interpretation which makes Nicholas's epistemology seem especially intriguing, he ends with a true interpretation which removes all intrigue. Nowhere, however, does he ever repudiate the first interpretation. Instead, he clings to both—as if each were entailed by some different aspect of Nicholas's "dialectical" philosophy. Accordingly, Jacobi's account contains an incoherence not found in Nicholas's epistemology itself.

Jacobi misdirects us a second time, too, regarding Nicholas's theory of knowledge. For he overemphasizes the proximity between Nicholas's theory and the theory advanced by Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.<sup>103</sup> This topic is too vast, and Jacobi's discussion is too brief, for us to pursue the matter further at this time. Suffice it to say that Jacobi is on the verge of once again presenting a philosophically intriguing interpretation that, once again, will later have to be toned down if it is to avoid misrepresentation.

Nicholas's metaphysics and his epistemology are so intertwined that they cannot be fully separated. And yet, neither one of them becomes distorted by separating them to the extent that we have. Vis-à-vis the metaphysics, our examination of Jacobi has revealed a weakness similar to Walter Schulz's. For, like Schulz, Jacobi too cannot resist the temptation of viewing Nicholas as philosophically more modern than he is.<sup>104</sup> Accordingly, he deals with *De Dato Patris Luminum* in a way similar to Schulz's dealing with *De Visione Dei*: he ignores the context of Nicholas's state-

ments and bends them to his own preconception. Thus, Jacobi can minimize what Nicholas accentuates and accentuate what Nicholas minimizes. What Nicholas partly disavows as imprecise Jacobi wholly endorses as essential. In the name of dialectics the *via negativa* is made to reflex into a shadowy *via positiva*. And through contortion of terminology the Christology is rendered self-contradictory. Though all of the foregoing is presumed to illustrate vividly just how modern a thinker Nicholas of Cusa is, the end result obscures the real features of this modernity, thereby miscasting Nicholas's role at the dawn of Renaissance philosophy.