

nicholas of cusa's  
dialectical mysticism

text, translation, and interpretive study  
of *de visione dei*

second edition

by jasper hopkins

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Herrn Prof. Dr. Rudolf Haubst und allen Mitgliedern  
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## preface

Within the tradition of late medieval mysticism Nicholas of Cusa's *De Visione Dei* (*On the Vision of God*), composed in 1453, commands a place of central importance. In this speculative work, instinct with a spirit of devotion, Nicholas meditates both upon the philosophical theme of God's infinity and upon the theological theme of God the Son's absolute mediatorship. For he recognizes that the Divine Being is not only *deus absconditus* but also *deus revelatus*. Because Nicholas emphatically develops, along paradoxical lines, such contrasting notions as *absconditus/revelatus*, *absolutus/contractus*, *infinitus/finitus*, *aeternalis/temporalis*, *perfectus/imperfectus*, and *exemplaris/participalis*, his speculative mysticism, like Meister Eckhart's, is highly dialectical.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Nicholas is not reporting actual mystical experiences but is reflecting dialectically upon the relationship between God's vision of man and man's vision of God. The former vision is necessarily exact, because God observes, so to speak, "from every possible angle." The latter vision is inevitably inexact, because the relationship between the finite and the Infinite is noncomparative, thus rendering man's positive conception of God, whether in this life or the next, only symbolical.

Given the magnificent intellectual and spiritual richness of *De Visione Dei*, the work itself (in translation) should appeal to a broad range of discerning readers. By contrast, the study that precedes the translation envisions as its audience a much narrower spectrum of students and specialists. The method of the study is *literarhistorisch*, not *problemgeschichtlich*. Indeed, the dangers of the latter method, when not subordinated to the former, are amply illustrated by Hans Blumenberg's unscholarly interpretation of Cusanus in his major book, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*. I set forth Blumenberg's mistakes in detail. For were I not to do so, no one would believe my mere assertion that his interpretation collapses. And in that case Nicholas's role at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance would, because of Blumenberg's preponderant influence, continue to be misjudged.<sup>2</sup>

In preparing the present edition of the Latin text, I not only worked from photographs and photocopies but also made on-site inspections of all the manuscripts. All told, I went over each of the manuscripts three times; and three times I proofread the final printed collation. Whatever errors may remain do so in defiance of my best efforts.

## Preface

This project was begun while I was an exchange professor (1981-82) at the *Philosophisches Institut* of the University of Graz, Austria. It was completed during a sabbatical year (1983-84), while I was a fellow at the National Humanities Center, in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. I am grateful to my colleagues at Graz for their generosity in arranging my teaching schedule. I likewise express appreciation to the University of Minnesota for granting the sabbatical leave, and to the directors and staff at the National Humanities Center for providing assistance in many forms, one of the most needed being the expert library service afforded by Alan Tuttle, Rebecca Sutton, and Jean Houston. At other libraries, in Europe and North America, I was kindly assisted by the following individuals, whose distinguished identifying-titles I here leave aside: Bernd Bader, Universitätsbibliothek, Giessen; Elisabeth Beare, Stadtbibliothek, Nürnberg; G. Franz, Stadtbibliothek, Trier; Hermann Hauke, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich; Otto Hunold, Cusanusstift, Bernkastel-Kues; Walter Neuhauser, Universitätsbibliothek, Innsbruck; Helga Ornig and Christl Unterrainer, Universitätsbibliothek, Salzburg; Beda Paluzzi, Biblioteca del Monumento Nazionale, Monastero di S. Scolastica, Subiaco; Julian Plante, Hill Monastic Library, St. John's College, Collegeville, Minnesota; Ivo Pomper, Stiftsbibliothek, Kloster Sankt Peter, Salzburg; Konrad von Rabenau, Evangelische Kirche der Union, Berlin (DDR); Hans-Erich Teitge and Ursula Winter, Deutsche Staatsbibliothek, Berlin (DDR); Brooke Whiting and James Davis, University Research Library, University of California at Los Angeles; Hans Zotter, Universitätsbibliothek, Graz. In addition, I owe special thanks to Otto Reberschak, of the University of Graz, who developed photographs for me, and to Pauline O'Connor, of Minneapolis, who assisted in other technical ways.

Finally, in dedicating the present volume to Rudolf Haubst and his associates at the *Institut für Cusanus-Forschung*, I do so in tribute to those whom I regard as among the finest exemplifiers of German historical scholarship.

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## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Since the publication of the first edition, which took account of twenty-three manuscripts of *De Visione Dei*, two additional ones have come to my attention: Latin Codex 19 - 26 at the Cathedral Library in Toledo, Spain and Latin Codex 99 at the Staats- und Stadtbibliothek in Augsburg, Germany. The latter of these is a valuable copy which was transcribed, onto paper, in 1472 and which was previously located in Augsburg at the Benedictine monastery of St. Ulrich and Afra. *De Visione Dei*, found on folios 167<sup>r</sup> - 227<sup>r</sup>, is the only Cusan work in the manuscript. I am grateful to Gertraud Weinzierl of the Staats- und Stadtbibliothek for her kind reception and assistance on the occasion of my visit to the library.

By contrast with the Augsburg codex, Latin Codex Toledo 19 - 26, which was also transcribed during the second half of the fifteenth century, is of no value apropos of *De Visione Dei*. Its readings are much too erratic and impressionistic to be reliable; and its scribe seems to have had only a meager knowledge of Latin. My examination of it in Toledo confirmed my decision to exclude it from the list of manuscripts here being compared. Thus, in Appendix III only the variant readings for Augsburg 99 are given.

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# nicholas of cusa's dialectical mysticism

## part i: interpretive study

## NICHOLAS OF CUSA'S DIALECTICAL MYSTICISM

### Part I: Interpretive Study

1. *Preliminary Observations.* 1.1. When Pope Nicholas V elevated Nicholas of Cusa to the office of cardinal on December 20, 1448, he did so partly in recognition of Nicholas's service as papal envoy and apostolic legate to the German peoples. For Nicholas's multiple missions between 1438 and 1448 were perceived in Rome as having helped persuade both clergy and nobility that the authority of the papacy exceeded the authority of the Council of Basel. The success of the papal initiatives can be seen in the fact that on February 17, 1448 Frederick III, King of Germany and Archduke of Austria, signed the Concordat of Vienna, therewith acknowledging the supremacy of the Holy See in religious matters.

On January 3, 1449 Nicholas was assigned titular headship of the Church of St. Peter in Chains, at Rome. And on April 26, 1450 he was consecrated Bishop of Brixen,<sup>1</sup> in Tirol. But before assuming vigorous administration of the bishopric, by taking up personal residence there two years later, he once again accepted the role of apostolic legate to the German nation—this time with the commission to renew spiritually the German church. His journey during 1451 and the first quarter of 1452 led him to visit such centers of spirituality as the Benedictine monasteries at Melk and Salzburg, the religious congregations at Deventer, Diepenveen, and Windesheim—in addition to visiting such centers of episcopal power as Trier, Mainz, Cologne, and Aachen. We have no reason to believe that this journey of reform led him, when en route from Salzburg to Munich, to make a detour to the Benedictine abbey at Tegernsee. The Abbey's records<sup>2</sup> inform us only of a subsequent sojourn, between May 31 and June 2, 1452. With the Tegernsee monks, and in particular with their abbot, Caspar Ayndorffer, Nicholas enjoyed exceptionally cordial relations. He not only valued their counsel<sup>3</sup> but even expressed the desire to have a cell prepared for him, since he longed for sacred leisure (*otium sacrum*) amid their company.<sup>4</sup> The Tegernsee monks, for their part, avidly solicited new works from Nicholas—works which they diligently copied and intently studied. Through their abbot and their prior they posed such questions as “whether apart from intellectual



knowledge, and even apart from prevenient or accompanying knowledge—whether only by means of affection or of the highest capability of the mind (a capability which many call *synderesis*)—the devout soul can attain unto God . . . .”<sup>5</sup> This question was crucial to the concerns of the Tegernsee community because, quintessentially, it was a question about the proper understanding of *theologia mystica* and of the pathway toward union with God. The soul that truly loves God desires to be united with Him. And mystical theology, as derived from Pseudo-Dionysius,<sup>6</sup> taught that mystical union occurs not merely through the will’s loving God but also through the intellect’s seeing God. Yet, this seeing is likewise a not-seeing, since that which is beheld is too resplendent to be observed. One beholds the place where God dwells but does not behold God in Himself.<sup>7</sup>

By the middle of the fifteenth century there was still no agreement regarding just what mystical theology was, though usually it was thought to consist of a configuration of some of the following tenets, variously interpreted: (1) In man the highest degree of perfection is in the spirit, or mind, or intellect (*spiritus vel mens vel intelligentia*). (2) God is approached by the cognitive power of the intellect most truly when He is approached *via negationis*. For since God is not, except in a symbolic sense, *like* anything whose nature the intellect can conceive, the intellect can more truly ascertain what God is not than it can descry what He is; but because He is not like *anything* the intellect either knows or conceives, He seems closer to nothing than to something. (3) Just as in accordance with the *via negationis* the intellect must become released from all imaginative and conceptual restraints, so in accordance with the *via devotionis* it must become released from the distorting strictures of sin. (4) This latter form of purification is communicated through divine grace, which enables the human response of faith and love, so that the greater the faith and love, the closer the soul approaches unto God. (5) When the soul, thus enabled, ascends beyond all that is sensible, rational, and intelligible, it enters into the darkness of unknowability and inconceivability—a darkness that Dionysius alluded to as *irrationalis et amens*.<sup>8</sup> (6) Herein it awaits, with keen expectancy and ardent longing, the vision of the glorious God, whose superbrilliance incomparably exceeds the splendor of the sun. And just as no sensible eyes can peer directly into the blinding sun, so, a fortiori, no intellectual eyes can behold

God as He is in Himself: the beblinding Divine Light is seen only unseeably. (7) This vision occurs in rapture (*raptus*), accompanied by ecstasy (*extasis*). (8) These, together, conduce unto happiness (*felicitas*) and rest (*quietas*). (9) And happiness and rest are more fully attained the more fully the soul is united with God. (10) Momentary mystical union in this lifetime is but a foretaste of the fuller beatific union in the heavenly state—a union so close that it can be spoken of as a transformation, an absorption, a deification, even though it falls short of an identity.

1.2. John Gerson,<sup>9</sup> in his *De Mystica Theologia*, cites a number of alternative descriptions of mystical theology:<sup>10</sup>

- Mystical theology is the soul's stretching forth unto God through loving desire.
- Mystical theology is anagogic movement (i.e., upward movement leading unto God) through fervent and pure love.
- Mystical theology is experiential knowledge-of-God acquired through the embrace of uniting love.
- Mystical theology is wisdom, i.e., appetizing knowledge of God, acquired when through love the highest summit of the affective power of the rational [soul] is united unto God.<sup>11</sup>
- Mystical theology is experiential knowledge-of-God acquired through a union-of-spiritual-affection with God.<sup>12</sup>

Gerson also includes the well-known formula: "*Theologia mistica est irrationalis et amens, et stulta sapientia . . .*"<sup>13</sup> Obviously, all of the foregoing descriptions, which Gerson regards as mutually compatible, require explication. What is meant, after all, by "*stulta sapientia*"? Just how closely uniting is the embrace of uniting love (*amoris unitivi complexus*)? And is the *supremus apex potentiae rationalis* to be identified with what Meister Eckhart and others had referred to as the *scintilla animae*? Gerson, to his lasting credit, attempted to answer such questions by distinguishing different forms of love and different kinds of knowing,<sup>14</sup> by sketching different theories regarding the *transformatio animae in deum*.<sup>15</sup> Gerson was intent upon drawing a clear distinction between *theologia mystica* and *theologia speculativa*. The latter, he said, originates from the intellectual power

of the rational soul, whereas the former arises out of the rational soul's affective power. The latter takes as its object what is true, the former what is good.<sup>16</sup> Speculative theology makes use of rational considerations that conform to philosophical studies such as physics, metaphysics, logic, and grammar, and therefore it requires scholastic training; mystical theology, by contrast, requires only that the soul acquire moral virtue and that it be perfected in its love for the good.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, mystical theology, though involving some kind of knowledge, does not require formal training and study; hence, it is accessible to believers who are unschooled as well as to those who are erudite. Indeed, through faith, hope, and love, thinks Gerson, the unschooled can arrive at mystical union more quickly than can the scholastic theologians.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, scholastic, or speculative, theology cannot be perfected in anyone apart from mystical theology, though someone's being perfected in mystical theology does not require his being perfected in speculative theology as well.<sup>19</sup>

One kind of knowledge is, however, requisite to mystical theology:<sup>20</sup> viz., the knowledge that God is totally lovable—a knowledge that can be obtained from faith and revelation.<sup>21</sup> Gerson cites approvingly Augustine's words "*invisa diligere possumus, incognita nequaquam*": "We are able to love things that are unseen, but we cannot at all love things that are unknown."<sup>22</sup> When Gerson goes as far as to speak of mystical theology as "*suprema atque perfectissima notitia*" ("supreme and most perfect knowledge"),<sup>23</sup> he has in mind the kind of acquainting knowledge that derives from religious experience.<sup>24</sup> And experiential knowledge of God, he believes, is attained more by means of penitent love than by means of intellectual ferreting.<sup>25</sup> Through love the rational soul is united with God—a union that Gerson is willing to call "*experimentalis Dei cognitio seu notitia vel perceptio*," and even "*theologia mystica*."<sup>26</sup> Mystical theology, then, is not theology in the sense of being a series, or a system, of theological propositions. Rather, for Gerson, it is theology in a twofold sense: primarily in the sense of being a knowledge of God, where the word "knowledge" has reference to the soul's *experiencing* the unitive embrace of the one whom it *recognizes* to be incomparably desirable—and secondarily in the sense of being instruction about what this experience of God is<sup>27</sup> and about how it is attainable. Gerson's descriptions of *theologia mystica* reflect these two senses. For sometimes he speaks of

"the loving union, of which mystical theology is seen to consist" (*"per predictam amorosam unionem, in qua mistica theologia consistere videtur . . ."*),<sup>28</sup> and sometimes he speaks of "the loving union of the mind with God—a union which occurs through mystical theology" (*"amorosa unio mentis cum Deo, que fit per theologiam mysticam . . ."*).<sup>29</sup> If mystical theology is *theology* because it is an experiential knowledge of God through a loving union, then it is *mystical* because this union is a transforming spiritual union<sup>30</sup> in which the soul, having become cognitively and affectionally detached from the world, is longingly and lovingly conscious only of God.<sup>31</sup>

Gerson depicts two routes toward mystical union of the human soul with God: the *via purae intelligentiae* and the *via devotionis*.<sup>32</sup> Regarding the first route, Gerson's statements are not fully consistent (though interpreters<sup>33</sup> sometimes talk as if they were). In the latter part of his *De Mystica Theologia* he writes: "Mystical theology is ecstatic love which is subsequent to our spirit's understanding—an understanding which, to be sure, is free of images, which becloud. Accordingly, whoever wills to devote himself to mystical theology must endeavor to attain unto this pure understanding. Otherwise, how would he attain unto the [state of] love that follows thereupon?"<sup>34</sup> But in his later work *Collectorium super Magnificat* he takes an altogether different position: "experiential perception of God does not require either a preceding or a succeeding acquaintance in terms of pure understanding."<sup>35</sup> Aside from this discrepancy, together with other attending ones, Gerson's views appear not unharmonious.<sup>36</sup> Three things, he himself seems to believe,<sup>37</sup> are conditions of the soul's mystical union with God, whether this union be sought *via purae intelligentiae* or whether it be sought *via devotionis*: there must be (1) longing for God, (2) removal of hindrances to union, and (3) earnest solicitation of God's good pleasure. The soul's longing is to be stimulated through heightened recognition of God's beauty and value; hindrances are to be removed through the soul's confessing its failing and torpor; and solicitation is to be made through importunate and ardent prayer.

To be sure, such longing, such arousal of the soul, such ardent prayer is possible only for believers. And yet, reminds Gerson: during their lifetimes on earth believers will not attain unto a union which is

so close that it will be an immediate and, as it were, face-to-face experiencing of God; for this state of knowing is reserved for the future life.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, in the present lifetime only a relatively small number of believers will be able to follow the *via purae intelligentiae* and to motivate their longing by contemplating the fact that God transcends not only all the beauty of all finite things but also all other characteristics of these things as well. Intrinsic to this kind of contemplation is a mode of *negatio*, or *abnegatio*,<sup>39</sup> that involves an intellectual turning away from created things in order to be directed more fully toward the Creator Himself. To this end the mind must abandon, or transcend, its sensible and intellectual operations; but it must ascend even higher by abandoning, or transcending, its very self.<sup>40</sup> The mind begins to detach itself from *its sensible operation* by recognizing that God is not like any actual material object. It begins to abandon *its intellectual operation* by recognizing that God is not like any conceivable finite being, whether this conceivable being is actually existent or is nonexistent. Finally, the mind begins to abandon *its very self* by detaching itself, insofar as possible,<sup>41</sup> from the awareness of everything except God.<sup>42</sup> Metaphorically speaking, the soul at this point will have entered into divine darkness—the darkness wherein dwells *deus absconditus*. Insofar as humanly possible the soul will have directed its thought and its affections<sup>43</sup> away from the world, away from itself, and upward toward God. At this point it will be dead to the world, which will hold no attraction, no value for it; it will be alive only unto the Creator,<sup>44</sup> whose unitive embrace it will expectantly and contemplatively be awaiting. In accordance with God's good pleasure, the deeply yearning, upward-mounting, silently imploring soul may be rewarded with the ecstatic experience of superinfused love and of rapturous union.<sup>45</sup> And yet, this union will not be of such intimacy that the soul will see God clearly and unveiledly, since God does not choose to present Himself directly and immediately to rapt believers in this lifetime.<sup>46</sup>

During the moment of ecstatic union the mind will be aware of the unitive bond between itself and God—will be aware of itself only in relation to God. Without this awareness, or knowledge, the mystical encounter could not rightly be called an experience.<sup>47</sup> When in *De Mystica Theologia* and *Super Magnificat* Gerson asserts that experiential knowledge of God does not occur through negation and

remotion alone, that the *via superexcellantiae* is also required,<sup>48</sup> he does so in order to preserve the legitimacy of the soul's belief that God is more excellent than—not less excellent than—our highest conceptions of goodness, love, beauty, and whatever else is valuable. For it is precisely this belief which motivates the soul in its desire to be united with God. The state of pure, or purified, understanding (*pura intelligentia*)—the state that characterizes the highest stage of the *via abnegationis* when the intellect is free from images and concepts of everything creaturely, prior to the soul's experience of ecstatic unitive love—is not attainable by the simple and unlearned (*simplici et rustici*), who are incapable of the abstractive contemplation that is required. And yet, these simple believers are not excluded from mystical theology, which, as Dionysius himself had said, is common to Christians.<sup>49</sup> In order to take account of this group, who also are required to believe with most devout faith that there exists a Good than which a greater cannot be *thought* (where *thinking* is construed as encompassing *sensing, imagining, inferring, and understanding*),<sup>50</sup> Gerson introduces his second route, the *via devotionis*.<sup>51</sup> Through faith and love, he explains, the soul of the simple, fervent believer can attain unto the same heights as the soul of the erudite—i.e., can attain unto ecstasy and can do so without the precondition of intellectual detachment. For through the edifying quality of his devout love the simple believer can become released from attachment to the world in order to soar upward unto the Beauty of the Lord. Thus, the *via devotionis* has its own mode of *abnegatio*—of dying to the world and to the self.

According to Gerson both the *via devotionis* and the *via purae intelligentiae* require love for God,<sup>52</sup> just as both require some positive conception of God, whether obtained from Scripture or from a combining, philosophically, of the *via abnegationis* and the *via superexcellantiae*.<sup>53</sup> Through the presence of love both routes lead to the possibility of the rapture which Gerson terms *extasis*.<sup>54</sup> But—keeps insisting Gerson—the *via devotionis* more readily leads to mystical union than does any pathway that requires an initial erudition.<sup>55</sup> His example of a typical ascent by faith is instructive. The simple believer may begin by considering the sacrament of the Eucharist and by believing through faith that during the celebration thereof the true and living Body of Christ is present. He can then proceed

from this belief to meditating upon the deeds performed by Christ during His earthly ministry. This meditating can conduce to even greater devotion by stimulating holy and humble affection. Moreover, the power of the Holy Spirit can purify the believer's devotional affection by turning it at that time toward loving no object the love of which would interfere with loving God. Thereafter, the believer can turn toward a holy and faith-filled consideration of the mystical Body of Christ, i.e., of the redeemed souls in Paradise and of those other souls which are yet to be redeemed. Finally, he can elevate his meditative devotion unto God alone, separating off every created lovable thing—separating them off not by means of reason or of understanding but by means of sincere love and by means of the mystery of devout faith, by which he believes the following: that his God is that than which nothing greater or more noble can be conceived or loved—that his God is all-desirable.<sup>56</sup> Gerson admits that the erudite can know all of these points more clearly than can the simple believer; but he denies that the erudite can know them more truly and more sublimely.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, he denies that they can know them in such way as to be elevated more readily unto mystical union or in such way as to dispense with the precondition of love.

All in all, then, Gerson's conception of *theologia mystica* attempts to harmonize the two motifs of love and knowledge. For on the one hand, his conception includes the view that love is the root of all the affections,<sup>58</sup> together with including the view that it is more perfect than faith.<sup>59</sup> And on the other hand, his conception embraces the doctrine that mystical union-of-love does not occur apart from some kind of prevenient and accompanying knowledge, as well as embracing the doctrine that, in general, the *via purae intelligentiae* must be supplemented by the *via superexcellentiae*. Both during and after his lifetime Gerson was accused of not having done justice either to the motif of love or to the motif of knowledge. The followers of Ruysbroeck were convinced that Gerson had never experienced ecstatic love, so that his teachings thereabout were bound to be misguided—a judgment confirmed, in their minds, by his attack upon their master. Perhaps it was with these disciples in mind that Gerson defended his authority to write about *experimentalis cognitio dei* even in the absence of an experience of mystical union.<sup>60</sup> Yet, perhaps it was the absence of such an experience that led him to take account, theologi-

cally, of the "inner experience . . . of blessed union" ("*experientia intrinseca . . . beatae unionis*"),<sup>61</sup> where the experience of union with God was now understood as nonecstatic experience fostered through the more usual pathways of faith-filled devotion.

If Gerson gave offense with his statement that oftentimes affection is greater where knowledge is minimal and that therefore no special knowledge other than the "knowledge of faith" is needed for mystical theology,<sup>62</sup> he was nonetheless not dismissive of erudition. Indeed, he argued that the doctrinal tradition of mystical theology (*doctrinalis traditio theologiae mysticae*) intersects with Scholastic theology and is not different or separate from it, as it is also not different or separate from true philosophy.<sup>63</sup> And yet, he was attacked on the alleged ground that he himself had betrayed the doctrinal tradition of mystical theology by veering from the teachings of the Great Dionysius.<sup>64</sup> One of the most instructive of such attacks came years after his death and is an indirect tribute to his great stature, as well as being a sign of his continuing influence. For the critic, Vincent of Aggsbach, one-time prior of the Carthusian Monastery at Aggsbach, Austria, did not hesitate to admit: "Gerson has a name next to the names of the great men on earth. And he has written many things which are transmitted everywhere. To these places faith is brought because of his celebrated reputation, especially among the learned."<sup>65</sup>

1.3. In 1453 Vincent wrote a treatise in which he roundly denounced Gerson's treatment of mystical theology.<sup>66</sup> He admitted to having previously held Gerson's writings in esteem and to having transcribed many of them. But after having studied these works more carefully, he found them objectionable. To begin with, he objects to Gerson's definitions of *mystical theology*, all of which he regards as too general and too vague—as leaving aside much that is essential.<sup>67</sup> Accordingly, infers Vincent, they do not clarify the practice of mystical theology but serve only to obfuscate it. Equally problematical in Vincent's eyes are other of Gerson's statements which, though not definitions, also display ignorance of what mystical theology is. Gerson states, for example, that love and mystical theology and perfect prayer either are the same thing or else presuppose one another.<sup>68</sup> But he seems to understand "perfect prayer" in the sense of verbal or mental or intellectual prayer—none of which modes, indicates Vincent, are identical with mystical theology. For these modes do not



transcend all conceptualizing of God, whereas mystical theology teaches that just such transcendence is required. Hence, mystical theology could rightly be called prayer only in the sense of being nonintellectual, or *superintellectual*, prayer—something which would better be termed *adoratio*.<sup>69</sup>

Vincent's first complaint overlaps with his second: Gerson goes wrong by teaching that an intellectual knowledge of God must guide and accompany the devout love that attains unto mystical union.<sup>70</sup> By contrast, continues Vincent, Dionysius and such true followers of his as Hugh of Balma taught that the soul is to elevate itself upward toward God through the power of love, assisted by the intellect's becoming ignorant, by its ceasing to conceptualize not only creatures (a point Gerson concedes) but also God or any of His persons (a point Gerson does not concede). For whoever conceptualizes God cannot do so otherwise than in terms of goodness, truth, being oneness, and eternity. He thus thinks of Him delimitedly, as being *this* rather than *that*.<sup>71</sup> (Precisely because every positive conception is delimiting, Dionysius taught that God is to be approached beyond all intellectual understanding.<sup>72</sup>) "And although this practice [of mystical theology] is difficult for many people (and, indeed, impossible for some), it is, in my opinion, very easy for a mind that is disposed thereto. If I had love (which, alas, I do not experience myself to have), then I would be sweetly and fervently aglow. I would hope that the breaking free from, or the abandoning of, images and concepts, etc., would not prove a great hindrance to me. But this art requires men of temperate passion, men of tranquil and modest spirit, men aglow with sweet love. It does not admit men who are involved in many tasks, men who are concerned with fleshly desires, men who are proud, ambitious, insincere, hypocritical, curious (who attempt to approach [solely] for the sake of the experience) . . ."<sup>73</sup> From Vincent's point of view the *via devotionis* becomes vitalized when it is taken in conjunction with the *via purae intelligentiae*. Gerson emphasized the independence of the two because of his fears regarding the capability of the simple religious believer. But in order to accommodate the simple believer he ends up with what Vincent regards as a distorted account of mystical theology.

Furthermore, Gerson makes a third mistake, thinks Vincent. By refusing to acknowledge that the *via purae intelligentiae* is essential

to mystical theology—by insisting that some positive conception of God must accompany the soul's detachment from the world and from its own self—Gerson associates himself with Scholastic theology, which looked askance at Dionysius's talk about the need to approach God *irrationaliter et amentaliter*. Indeed, Gerson keeps trying, though in vain, to harmonize mystical theology with Scholastic theology and philosophy:

The same reverend doctor [i.e., Gerson], with much concern and with many words, endeavored, in different works, to harmonize mystical theology with Scholastic theology and with the philosophers. I believe that this harmony is scarcely more useful than if the same thing were made by a cobbler and by a painter (the former making a shoe of leather and the latter making it of colors) and the agreement and differences between these objects were cleverly sought. Scholastic theology is the reading, study, and understanding of Sacred Scripture—of both the Old and the New Testaments. Mystical theology is a form, or an act, of devotion or is a unique mode of the mind's extension unto God . . .<sup>74</sup>

Vincent sees Gerson as undermining the Dionysian tradition by attempting to *de-radicalize* it, to *de-mystify* it. Symptomatic of this attempt is Gerson's misconstrual of Dionysius's reference to "the unlearned" (*indocti*). For although Gerson takes this to indicate those who live evilly, clearly Dionysius was referring to those who "are attached to existing things, who believe that there is not anything supersubstantially above existing things, and who suppose themselves to know, by means of the knowledge that conforms to themselves, Him who has made darkness His hiding place." <sup>75</sup> Because of Gerson's predilection for Scholasticism, his theology—unlike Hugh of Balma's—is mixed with curious, subtle, and irrelevant considerations, accuses Vincent. It draws, for example, upon Aristotle's doctrine of the potencies of the soul. But, assails Vincent, the whole of *De Anima*—indeed, the whole of philosophy—has little importance for mystical theology; otherwise—and here Vincent turns Gerson's argument back upon itself—simple believers would not be capable of attaining unto mystical theology.<sup>76</sup>

A fourth accusation charges Gerson with contradicting himself<sup>77</sup> when in *Super Magnificat* he writes that mystical union presupposes *charitas* but in *Elucidatio Scolastica Mysticae Theologiae* states that superinfused love remains without *charitas*.<sup>78</sup> In other instances, admits

Vincent, Gerson may simply be changing his mind rather than contradicting himself. Thus, whereas in *De 12 Industriis* he seems to hold the opinion that mystical theology does not preclude an intellectual knowledge of God,<sup>79</sup> in *Anagogicum de Verbo et Hymno Gloriae* he rejects this opinion.<sup>80</sup> However, in both of these instances, charges Vincent, Gerson opposes himself to the "expositors of Blessed Dionysius," thereby not only breaking with the tradition but, in one of the cases, even miscasting it through false interpretation.<sup>81</sup>

Finally, Vincent purports to come to the source of Gerson's errors:<sup>82</sup> viz., his mistaken identification of mystical theology with contemplation<sup>83</sup>—an identification even more patently erroneous than the identification with prayer. Contemplation, after all, takes its name from contemplating, or seeing; but mystical theology is called mystical because it has to do with hiddenness.<sup>84</sup> And between sight and concealment (i.e., between seeing and not-seeing) there is no identity. Moreover, the activity of the advance stages of contemplation requires a union of an intellectual component and an affective component. By contrast, the exercise of mystical theology is said by Vincent to consist only of affection. Gerson himself, argues Vincent, concedes that there are many differences between contemplation and mystical theology, for in *De 12 Industriis* he acknowledges that through love the believer who is little trained in metaphysics can successfully turn away from images.<sup>85</sup> In the end, Vincent reaffirms the radical character of mystical theology: unlike contemplation—which is the elevation of the mind unto God, an elevation guided and accompanied by reflection—mystical theology is a *bedarkened* elevation of the mind unto God, *without any guiding or accompanying reflections*.<sup>86</sup>

Vincent's critique serves to exhibit the context within which the controversy over mystical theology had developed. The monks at Aggsbach, Salzburg, Melk, Tegernsee, and other affiliate monasteries were puzzled over how rightly to construe the relationship between love and knowledge, over whether an immediate, "face-to-face" vision of God was possible during their lifetimes, over what steps were prerequisite to this vision. What was meant by the soul's "transcending itself"? What was meant by "superintellectual prayer," by "pure understanding," "pure devotion," "experiential knowledge of God," "entering into darkness with Moses," "being raptured unto the third heaven with Paul"? To monastic communities these were questions that seemed to be vital.

1.4. When Nicholas of Cusa assumed active administration of the diocese of Brixen in April 1452, he was already esteemed as cardinal and reformer—but also as the author of some eighteen treatises and dialogues, not to mention an even larger number of sermons. His masterly and powerful *De Docta Ignorantia* (1440) had firmly secured his reputation as an important thinker—though a controversial one. John Wenck, of course, had denounced the treatise of 1440 as heretical and had labelled Nicholas a pseudo-prophet,<sup>87</sup> just as Vincent of Aggsbach later accused him of resisting the Holy Spirit and of teaching a strange, new doctrine.<sup>88</sup> Vincent grouped Nicholas with Gerson and Marquard Sprenger and impugned all three collectively. Each member of this erring trinity, he maintained, taught the same grave falsehood: viz., that acquainting knowledge of God *preceded* rather than *succeeded* the experience of loving union.<sup>89</sup> And yet, Vincent still esteemed Nicholas highly enough to refer to him as “a man great in body, great in mind, great in knowledge, great in eloquence, great in benefices, great in wealth, elevated in honors”<sup>90</sup>—as someone whose work<sup>91</sup> was of value for the *via illuminativa*, even if not for the *via unitiva*.<sup>92</sup> That such a man as Nicholas would be consulted by the monks of Tegernsee seems only natural—especially given his vigorous rebuttal of Wenck in *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* (1449) and his exultation of unschooled wisdom in *Idiota de Sapientia* (1450). His tribute to this kind of wisdom seems to have something in common with Gerson’s respect for the simple religious believer. And we know, in fact, that Nicholas was acquainted both with Gerson’s *Theologia Mystica Speculativa* and with his *Theologia Mystica Practica*.<sup>93</sup>

In two letters to the abbot and monks at Tegernsee—the two that sought to answer queries about the teachings of Dionysius—Nicholas displays agreement with ideas from Gerson and with ideas from Dionysius.<sup>94</sup> Mystical theology, he explains in the later of these two letters and in the fashion of Dionysius, must go beyond not only the *via positiva* but also the *via negativa*.<sup>95</sup> It goes beyond the former by realizing that the soul’s encounter with any positively conceived being would be an encounter, at best, with only a semblance of God—perhaps even with the angel Satan, who can transform himself into an angel of light.<sup>96</sup> It goes beyond the latter by realizing that what is altogether unknown is neither loved nor discovered—and that even if

such an unknown thing *were* "discovered," i.e., encountered, it would not be recognized.<sup>97</sup> According to mystical theology, maintains Nicholas, the soul rises upward unto God not by altogether suspending the operation of the intellect (*non linquendo intellectum*), as Vincent would have us believe; rather, the intellect itself must discern that the soul is entering into the density and darkness where contradictions coincide. In the letter written a year earlier<sup>98</sup> Nicholas gave a different answer to a different question—a question about the relationship between mystical theology, love, and knowledge. In mystical theology, he answered in a manner reminiscent of Gerson, knowledge must accompany love. For whatever is loved is loved under the aspect of the good—i.e., is loved as being a good. So if the soul did not deem God to be a good, it would not love Him; and if it loves Him, it deems Him a good. This judging, or deeming, is the intellectual, or "cognitive," component that is necessary for love. And yet, though the loving soul apprehends God to be a good, it understands the nature of this good only *aenigmatice*, and not as it is in itself.<sup>99</sup> Like Gerson, Nicholas sometimes, as here, uses the word "knowledge" (*cognitio*) where what he means in the context is "conception" (*conceptio*).<sup>100</sup> In accordance with this broad usage of *cognitio* and in agreement with his teaching in *De Docta Ignorantia*, he is claiming, unlike Gerson, that our concept of good has only a *symbolic* meaning insofar as it is used to refer to God.

The foregoing two letters of September 22, 1452 and September 14, 1453 testify to the fact that Nicholas's reflections on mystical theology were an extension of his doctrine of learned ignorance.<sup>101</sup> In the second of these letters he discloses his intention to expand a section of *De Theologiis Complementis* (i.e., *Complementum Theologicum*) into a separate treatise that deals with mystical theology and that makes use of an omnivoyant portrait. This separate work could only have been *De Visione Dei*. Three considerations warrant the presumption that it was finished before the end of the year: (1) In the letter of September 14, 1453 Nicholas indicates that he is eager to complete it—a statement which suggests that completion is not far off.<sup>102</sup> (2) Codex Latinus Gissensis 695 contains as *explicit* the words "*Finivit Brixne 1453. 8 Novembris. Nycolaus cardinalis*".<sup>103</sup> And (3) Letter 8, from Abbot Caspar of Tegernsee, indicates that he, Caspar, has received a copy of *De Visione Dei*. Although we do not know

the exact date of Caspar's letter, we know that it must have been written a considerable time before February 12, 1454—the date of Nicholas's reply thereto.<sup>104</sup> Given the usual intervals required for the exchange of correspondence, we may judge reliably that Nicholas was finished with *De Visione Dei* by the end of 1453. And taking seriously the *explicit* of Giessen 695, we may infer that Nicholas completed it before November 8. Indeed, it was probably among the "*aliqua*" to which he referred in a letter dated October 23, 1453: "Regarding the items about which I wrote on a previous occasion: you will have some of them (*aliqua*) soon. I was planning to send them now, but they have not yet been copied."<sup>105</sup>

The title *De Visione Dei* (*The Vision of God*) has a deliberately twofold meaning, corresponding, respectively, to the subjective and the objective construal of the genitive case of "*Deus*." On the first construal the vision is *God's vision* of creatures; on the second, it is *creatures' vision* of God. The titles of Chapters 4 and 8 illustrate the first construal; the title of Chapter 9 contains an instance of the second. And a sentence in Chapter 10 combines both ideas: "In that You see all creatures You are seen by all creatures."<sup>106</sup> Insofar as vision-of-God is *God's vision*, Nicholas compares it with an eye: "O Lord, You see and You have eyes. Therefore, You are an eye, because Your having is being."<sup>107</sup> The eye is like a living mirror, mirroring the visible forms of all that it sees. In the case of human beings whatever is seen is seen from a given angle, or perspective. Consequently, many things whose forms are mirrored in the human eye remain unobserved because the eye cannot attend to all these images at once.

But since Your sight *is* an eye, i.e., a living mirror, it sees within itself all things. Indeed, because it is the Cause of all visible things, it embraces and sees all things in the Cause and Rational Principle of all things, viz., in itself. Your eye, O Lord, proceeds to all things without turning. The reason our eye turns toward an object is that our sight sees from an angle of a certain magnitude. But the angle of Your eye, O God, is not of a certain magnitude but is infinite. Moreover, the angle of Your eye is a circle—or better, an infinite sphere—because Your sight is an eye of sphericity and of infinite perfection. Therefore, Your sight sees—roundabout and above and below—all things at once.<sup>108</sup>

The angle of God's eye is an infinite sphere inasmuch as God's infi-

nite sight sees all things from all perspectives. God—as all-seeing Subject who views, at once, all things “roundabout and above and below”—has, so to speak, the center of His perception everywhere and its delimiting circumference, or circumscribing bound, nowhere.<sup>109</sup> The identity of divine seeing and divine being, maintains Nicholas, is adumbrated in the Greek word for God, viz., “*theos*”—a word that is cognate with “*theōro*,”<sup>110</sup> as in Latin “*visus*” is cognate with “*video*.” “Therefore, the sages say that God sees Himself and all things by means of one indescribable viewing, because He is the Vision of visions.”<sup>111</sup>

Nicholas illustrates God’s all-encompassing vision by means of the portrait, or icon, of a face that appears to be omnivoyant: from whatever perspective anyone looks at it he has the impression that its eyes are upon him alone; but by inquiring of someone else, he can ascertain that its gaze is also directed, as it were, completely at the other. If one observer moves while the other remains stationary, the icon’s eyes seem for the one who moves to be moved with him and for the one who is unmoving to be fixed unmovedly upon him himself. But if both observers move, in such way that they approach each other from opposite directions while looking toward the icon, the icon’s eyes are experienced by each as wholly following his own motion; and yet, the eyes are inferred to be following opposite motions at the same time. Like the omnivoyant figure, God’s eyes “run to and fro throughout the whole earth,”<sup>112</sup> so that at once He beholds all things, for the angle of His eye is infinite. “Whither shall I flee from thy face?” asks the Psalmist.

If I ascend into heaven, thou art there: if I descend into hell, thou art present. If I take my wings early in the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea: Even there also shall thy hand lead me: and thy right hand shall hold me.<sup>113</sup>

The divine eye never forsakes us, never turns away. But when we turn our gaze away from God, fixing it upon worldly goods which we prefer to the Supreme Good, the eye of God looks upon us no longer with graciousness but now with condemnation.<sup>114</sup>

Because of Nicholas’s use of an illustrative icon, his work was sometimes referred to by the alternative title “*De Icona*.”<sup>115</sup> Indeed, in *De Possest* 58:20-21 he himself refers to it in this way. Like the

face of the icon, God's Face looks upon us; and we, for our part—and here occurs the objective construal of the genitive in "*visio dei*"—look unto God as we would look unto the face of the icon. But our mental eye, says Nicholas, is "cloaked with contraction and affection," so that the mind, in looking unto God, sees Him according to its own affections, inclinations, and propensities. Whoever looks lovingly unto God will see God as looking back lovingly upon him; whoever looks angrily unto God will see God as looking back with wrath. Thus, the divine eye mirrors back unto us our own propensities, just as when we look eastward toward the icon, it seems to look back at us from the east, and when we are positioned so that we look westward toward it, it looks back at us from the west, as it were. We mentally behold God, then, not as He is in Himself but only in accordance with the conditioning nature of our finitude. For the mind's eye can never escape from its contractedness in order to behold God from all angles, as it were—behold Him as He beholds and knows Himself.<sup>116</sup> Nor can the mind rid itself of its affectional nature, though this nature can be transformed through spiritual regeneration wrought by the Holy Spirit in cooperation with a man's faith.<sup>117</sup>

2. *Our Knowledge of God.* 2.1. The soul that looks believingly unto God may begin to contemplate, as did the Psalmist, "the beauty of the Lord."<sup>118</sup> Nicholas himself, from out of his own contemplation, exclaims: "O Face exceedingly lovely! All the things which have received the gift of looking thereupon do not suffice for admiring its beauty."<sup>119</sup> In the Neoplatonic tradition within which Nicholas is situated, beauty is regarded as guiding and edifying the soul. Through the vision of beauty the soul's love can become intensified and ennobled, until, finally, the soul gazes upon Beauty itself. Though this traditional view has its origins in Plato's *Symposium*, it is mediated to Nicholas through Dionysius's writings.<sup>120</sup> (Gerson, too, as we have seen, incorporates the theme of beauty into his conception of mystical theology.) Nicholas follows Dionysius in allowing that God's beauty is "seeable" by the mind *only insofar as the mind transcends itself*. That is, God's beauty is not mentally seeable, is not conceivable; it is seeable only in the sense that it is seen to be inconceivable: "Therefore, as regards whoever sets out to see Your Face: as



long as he conceives of something, he is far removed from Your Face. For every concept of face is less than Your Face, O Lord; and all beauty that can be conceived is less than the beauty of Your Face."<sup>121</sup> God, says Nicholas, is Absolute Beauty, the Form that gives being to all beautiful forms.<sup>122</sup>

It may seem strange that Nicholas speaks of our seeing God's beauty, while at the same time telling us that in Himself God is not beautiful and that His nature is inconceivable by all except Himself.<sup>123</sup> So although Nicholas calls God "Absolute Beauty" and uses the predicate "beautiful" of Him, these expressions must be taken symbolically. For what Nicholas says of goodness applies equally to beauty: "infinite goodness is not goodness but is Infinity."<sup>124</sup> However, just as Nicholas continues to call God good, so he continues to call Him beautiful. In all beautiful objects, he declares, God's beauty is seen symbolically and beveledly (*velate et in aenigmate*).<sup>125</sup> And during the present lifetime it can be seen unveiledly (*revelate*) in one and only one manner: by way of mystical theology. The seeker of God's Face must enter into darkness, or ignorance, by passing beyond all knowledge and all conception of every kind of face and every kind of beauty. This is the familiar route of the *via purae intelligentiae*; and it draws upon the comparison with the light of the sun:

When our eye seeks to see the sun's light, which is the sun's face, it first looks at it in a veiled manner in the stars and in colors and in all participants in the sun's light. But when our eye strives to view the sun's light in an unveiled manner, it passes beyond all visible light, because all such light is less than the light it seeks. But since it seeks to see a light which it cannot see, it knows that as long as it sees something, this is not the thing it is seeking.<sup>126</sup>

Nicholas adds the crucial words: "*In this way and in no other* the inaccessible light and beauty and splendor of Your Face can be approached *unveiledly*."<sup>127</sup> In this lifetime God's light and beauty are "seen unveiledly" only insofar as the darkness in the eye of the intellect becomes more dense and forbidding—i.e., only insofar as the intellect becomes more and more cognisant of its necessary ignorance.

Gerson made a different use of a related example. He likened man's vision of God to an observer situated atop a high mountain. Beneath him are dark clouds that shut him off visually from the

world below; between him and the sun there is another set of dark clouds that block his direct vision of the sun but that display diffusedly and obliquely some small measure of sunlight, so that the darkness is not pitch black.<sup>128</sup> In the contrast between this illustration and Nicholas's illustration rests an essential difference between Cusanus and Gerson: it is the difference between ascending into pitch darkness and ascending into an obscuring darkness *that can be seen*.<sup>129</sup> According to Nicholas, that is, there is an infinite disproportion between any finite concept of God and God's undifferentiated being,<sup>130</sup> which only God Himself can truly conceive. According to Gerson, on the other hand, the *via superexcellentiae* legitimates some measure of real analogy and proportion between the divine nature and the human conception thereof, so that the *via negativa*, by itself, is not adequate for mystical theology. Now, Nicholas himself subscribes to the *via superexcellentiae*, as we recognize from *De Possest* 56:15-17; but, unlike Gerson, he uses it to establish the fact of God's incomprehensibility.<sup>131</sup> For though we affirm that God is supergood, superbeautiful—indeed, supersensible, superimaginable, superintelligible—what we mean is that He infinitely surpasses every characteristic that any finite thing has and every characteristic that any finite thing does not have but could have. When God is encountered mystically, He is encountered as transcending *per infinitum* all differentiation—encountered as beyond the coincidence of contradictories such as good and not-good, being and not-being.<sup>132</sup> (This encounter, repeats Nicholas, occurs in darkness, where *deus absconditus* is concealed from the eyes of all the wise.)<sup>133</sup> Thus, Nicholas can claim that God is encountered beyond the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*,<sup>134</sup> beyond the distinction between "is an *x*" and "is not an *x*." Gerson, too, seems to acknowledge this point when he endorses Dionysius's statement that the rational soul, as it follows the *via theologiae mysticae*, must suspend its intellectual operation with respect to all created or creatable being and not-being.<sup>135</sup> But, as we have seen, Gerson, unlike Nicholas, defines *mystical theology* in such way that it allows another pathway unto God: viz., the pathway of negation qua negation-of-affection. This route has little to do with the *via purae intelligentiae*, which is not attainable by the simple religious believer, thinks Gerson. Nicholas, however, interprets *mystical theology* in such way that

the *via purae intelligentiae* is a necessary condition of approaching God *mystically*,<sup>136</sup> though God may be approached other than mystically, as when He is entreated in public prayer or worshipped in the privacy of the monastic cell.

By now it has become apparent that in *De Visione Dei* Nicholas uses diversely the expression "*videre deum*"—an expression which corresponds to the objective-genitive construal of "*visio dei*." The sense we have just been exploring is the one related to the possibility of *mystical* union in this lifetime. Prerequisite to this union, we have noted, is the recognition that *what God is*<sup>137</sup> is unknowable and inconceivable by us, except symbolically. "When I see You to be Absolute Infinity . . .," remarks Nicholas, "then I begin to behold You unveiledly and to enter unto the source of delights."<sup>138</sup> This beholding is a mental viewing which is to be accomplished as a precondition of the possibility of rapture. It is part of what is meant by "entering into darkness with Moses." And it is associated with the doctrines of learned ignorance and of the coincidence of contradictories. For to see that God is Absolute Infinity is to recognize that He is beyond all differentiation, that every finite mind is, therefore, necessarily ignorant of His nature. Accordingly, Nicholas avows: "I see You in the garden of Paradise, and I do not know what I see, because I see no visible thing. I know only the following: viz., that I know that I do not know—and never can know—what I see."<sup>139</sup> Here, as so often, Nicholas speaks paradoxically: "I see . . . no visible thing." Indeed, to see the Unseeable God is, for Nicholas, one kind of seeing: viz., the seeing *that* God is unseeable.

Nicholas continues in this same paradoxical vein by reasoning: (1) There are finite beings. (2) If there is an end of the finite, then there is the Infinite. (3) But there is an end of the finite. (4) Therefore, there is the Infinite.<sup>140</sup> This argument is too imprecise to qualify as an attempt to establish God's existence. Nor is Nicholas making such an attempt, for nowhere in *De Visione Dei* does he ever call into question the existence of God, so that a proof would become desirable. He is simply contemplating God's being the End of all creation<sup>141</sup>—an End that is without an end, because it is an Infinite End. Such paradoxical speculation, he believes, is helpful for introducing the intellect to a knowledge both of its own ignorance and of the coinci-

dence of contradictories:

Because, O Lord, You are the End that delimits all things, You are an End of which there is no end; and thus You are an End without an end—i.e., an Infinite End. This [fact] escapes all reasoning, for it implies a contradiction.<sup>142</sup>

God delimits the universe, and each thing in it, in that He is the center and the circumference of the world and of all things in the world.<sup>143</sup> For the infinity of His perspectives completely encompasses and defines each and every thing. And yet, puzzles Nicholas, how can God *be* the definition, the limitation, the end of everything if He Himself is without definition, limitation, and end?<sup>144</sup> For an Infinite End is no more an end than infinite goodness is goodness.<sup>145</sup> Taken literally, the words "Infinite End" seem to Nicholas to form a phrase whose meaning is contradictory; but interpreted figuratively, as when Nicholas says in *De Docta Ignorantia* that God is the *circumference* of the world, the words neither have a contradictory meaning nor are in danger of being meaningless. For God is Infinite End in that He is the circumference of the world and each thing in it; and He is the circumference, Nicholas has said, in that at once He beholds the world and all its objects from every possible perspective. Yet, Nicholas does not suppose that we can imagine or conceive what such infinite perception is like, since it is not at all like anything we could ever experience. But, as Nicholas understands the matter: when God is compared, metaphorically, to an all-seeing eye, He is *not being signified as* resembling any kind of eye or any kind of seeing that we can imagine or can form a conceptual likeness of. Rather, He *is being signified as* seeing in a way which does not resemble anything we can imagine or can form a conceptual likeness of.<sup>146</sup> And just as it makes some sense to assert that God is undifferentiated being, even though we cannot imagine or (positively) conceive of undifferentiated being, so it makes some sense to speak of Him as "perceiving" in a way that necessarily eludes our power to imagine or to conceive a likeness thereof. Nicholas never abandons his point that Infinite Sight is not sight but is Infinity. But he does not consider this point to preclude the legitimacy of speaking of God *as if* He perceived in a way analogous to our mental insight and *as if* His perceiving eye were an infinite sphere that "sees—roundabout and above and below—all things at once."<sup>147</sup>

But how, we might wonder, does Nicholas legitimate the use of some symbolisms and the repudiation of others? The correct answer, it seems clear, is that he does so by appeal both to revelation and to the principle of supereminence. According to the latter appeal God may not fittingly be symbolized as less than the summit of all perfection; rather, He must be affirmed to be *incomparably more perfect* than any compatible set of perfections that is humanly conceivable.<sup>148</sup> According to the former appeal we learn from the life and teaching of Jesus, "the sole Revealer of His own Father,"<sup>149</sup> which symbolisms most befit God. Thus, even though infinite goodness is not goodness, still Nicholas purports to learn through Christ's ministry, doctrine, and sacrificial death about the kind of goodness that God requires of us and that makes us more and more Godlike, as it were. "If by every possible means I make myself like unto Your goodness," he declares regarding Christ, "then according to my degree of likeness thereto I will be capable of receiving truth."<sup>150</sup> To become "like unto Your goodness" is to become "more conformed, and similar, to the Word."<sup>151</sup> Becoming conformed to the Word—through faith, love, and good works—is the spiritual prerequisite to any kind of union with God, and therefore, to *mystical* union in particular.<sup>152</sup>

On the basis of such spiritual conformity of soul, the intellect of the mystical theologian can mount upward unto the wall of absurdity that surrounds Paradise, wherein dwells Inaccessible Divine Light. The wall of absurdity is the wall of the coincidence of contradictories—of goodness and not-goodness, mercifulness and not-mercifulness, creator and not-creator, oneness and not-oneness, etc.—beyond which *deus absconditus* makes His abode. In rising up mystically, the soul, we have noted, must recognize that the goodness-of-God as seen in Christ does not and cannot characterize Infinity itself in itself. This recognition, together with spiritual conformity to Christ, is a precondition of the intellect's experiencing God—i.e., of the intellect's being caught up beyond its own powers and operations unto experiencing as darkness the superbrilliant Divine Light. This experience of darkness will not be dreadful or frightening. For the darkness will be experienced as intimate, beshielding warmth that befits joyous and loving union. Such union can be accomplished only insofar as the soul is united to God through Christ, the Son of God.<sup>153</sup> And it may be preceded by a lesser state of mental rapture accompanying the

discernment—prior to entering into intellectual darkness—that Christ is Absolute Mediator.<sup>154</sup>

2.2. A second sense of “*videre deum*” is related to the notion of sonship (*filiatio*).

2.2.1. Nicholas takes this notion from John 1:12: “But as many as received him, he gave them power to be made the sons of God, to them that believe in his name.”<sup>155</sup> In *De Visione Dei* 18 (83) sonship is alluded to in the following words: “A man who receives You, His receivable God, passes over into a union which, because of its closeness, can be given the name *sonship*.” Nicholas does not develop the notion any further here because he has already explored it at length in *De Filiatione Dei* (1445), where he identified sonship with deification and with the intuitive vision of God.<sup>156</sup> This intuitive vision is said to be an apprehension of Truth<sup>157</sup> and to be a participation in the divine power.<sup>158</sup> Accordingly, sonship is the ultimate perfecting of the intellect; it is the intellect’s attaining not merely unto truth insofar as it is befigured in symbolisms drawn from the sensible world but even unto Truth insofar as it is intellectually seeable apart from symbolisms. Though this seeing will occur without any symbolisms from the sensible world, it will not occur apart from the modalities of seeing and knowing that characterize the future life.<sup>159</sup> Sonship, which Nicholas affirms to be attainable by faith, begins in this lifetime but is brought to perfection only in the future, resurrected state, where Truth is seen as it is. Qua commencing in this lifetime, it precedes the possibility of mystical theology; qua brought to perfection in the future life, it excels the results of mystical theology, for it is a higher state of ascent. In becoming sons of God believers do not become something other than they now are, states Nicholas; rather, what they now are they shall then be in another manner.<sup>160</sup> Thus, their transformation—their becoming ever more like Christ—will not be a transformation of their essence into the divine essence. Only Christ Himself, the only-begotten Son of God, is so perfectly Son that His (divine) nature is identical with the Father’s. Through participation, by faith, in Christ’s Superabsolute Sonship all believers obtain their own sonship.<sup>161</sup> The highest stages of this participatory union with Christ and—through Christ—with the Father take place in the future life and are referred to as seeing Truth itself, which is the Word of God.<sup>162</sup>

In the eschaton<sup>163</sup>—Nicholas has told us (in accordance with I John 3:1-2)—Christ will be seen *as He is* and God will be seen in Christ; but though in Christ God will be intellectually seen apart from any sensory image or symbolism, He will not be seen *as He is in Himself*.<sup>164</sup> This *intellectualis visio Christi*, apart from symbolisms, is that which the practitioner of mystical theology is ultimately seeking:

Accordingly, this name [*possest*] leads the one-who-is-speculating beyond all the senses, all reason, and all intellect unto a mystical vision, where there is an end to the ascent of all cognitive power and where there is the beginning of the revelation of the unknown God. For, having left all things behind, the seeker-after-truth ascends beyond himself and discerns that he still does not have any greater access to the invisible God, who remains invisible to him. (For God is not seen by means of any light from the seeker's own reason.) At this point the seeker awaits, with most devout longing, the omnipotent Sun—expecting that when darkness is banished by its rising, he will be illuminated, so that he will see the invisible [God] to the extent that God will manifest Himself.<sup>165</sup>

The prospective banishing of darkness will be the seeing of God in Christ. For Christ is the sole Revealer of the Father not only during the present era but also during the eschatological age. The believer, in being united to Christ through his intellectual nature, may be said to see the Face of God. This union will be so close that in Christ the human intellect will see itself as it is. Nicholas illustrates this point<sup>166</sup> by likening Christ, who is the supreme Reflection of God, unto a completely perfect and completely straight Mirror in which God appears. He calls this Mirror the Mirror-of-truth, because in it all creatures—whom he likens unto mirrors that are variously contracted and curved—are reflected *as they are*. In turn, the Mirror-of-truth is reflected in these contracted mirrors not as it is but with a degree of variation that accords with the degree of curvature of the respective mirror. Now, if any given *intellectual* creature—i.e., intellectual, living “mirror”—were brought into position in front of the Mirror-of-truth, in which all creaturely mirrors are reflected, then into this given mirror the Mirror-of-truth would infuse itself; and the given mirror would receive this infused ray in which would be contained the true images of all the other mirrors. Thus, at one and the same instant this given mirror (1) would see itself, as it is, in the Mirror-of-truth and (2) would see, in the mirror which it itself is, all other

objects. But the objects would be seen not as they are in themselves but as they are conditioned by the degree of curvature of the given receiving mirror. Thus, the more nearly straight and the more perfectly clean this mirror is, the more truly and clearly it will see in itself both God's glory and all other objects. In this way, then, the mirror in question becomes a possessor of God—becomes, as it were, a son of God, so that all things are in it and so that in it they *are* it.

The foregoing illustration, believes Nicholas, displays how in accordance with faith, love, and righteous deeds the human intellect will be elevated in the future life unto very close union with God-in-Christ. In this union the intellect will embrace Christ, who is all in all.<sup>167</sup> In becoming one with Christ—one through union, not through identity—it will receive the likenesses of all things at the moment when “in it all things are it.”<sup>168</sup> Even though Nicholas does not mean to imply that this union of the human intellect with the Word of God will be an identity, he opens the door to misunderstanding when he goes as far as to write: “God will not be, for this [intellectual] spirit, *other* than it or different or distinct from it; nor will the Divine Form (i.e., the Word of God) or the Spirit of God be *other* than it. For all otherness and difference are far beneath sonship itself. For a most pure intellect makes to be intellect all that is understandable, since in this intellect all that which is understandable is the intellect itself.”<sup>169</sup> In attaining unto the highest stage of sonship, the intellect can be said to have become deified, notes Nicholas,<sup>170</sup> and to have transcended all comparative relationships and all rational considerations.<sup>171</sup>

But since the intellect is a living intellectual likeness of God: when it knows itself, it knows in its own oneness all things. Now, it knows itself when it beholds itself in God as it is. But this is when in the intellect God is the intellect. Therefore, knowing all things is nothing other than seeing oneself as a likeness of God—[a vision] which is sonship.<sup>172</sup>

At this point the intellect will have become the intellectual universality (*intellectualis universitas*) of all things; for it will be the discrete notion of all things, since it will have become like all that it has understood.<sup>173</sup> This Cusan doctrine is also found in *De Possest*, where the intellect is said to be able to attain unto complete knowledge when it attains unto a future knowledge of God's Word:

For the highest degree of happiness—viz., the intellectual vision of the Almighty—is the fulfillment of that desire of ours whereby we all desire to



know. Therefore, unless we arrive at the knowledge of God—viz., the knowledge by which He created the world—our mind (*spiritus*) will not be at rest. For as long as the mind does not attain to this knowledge, it will not attain to complete knowledge (*scientia scientiarum*). This knowledge is the knowledge of God's Word; for the Word of God is the Concept both of itself and of the universe. Indeed, anyone who does not arrive at this Concept will not attain to a knowledge of God and will not know himself. For what is caused cannot know itself if its Cause remains unknown.<sup>174</sup>

Nicholas's exuberance in *De Filiatione Dei* and in *De Possest* is an echo of his earlier exuberance in *De Docta Ignorantia* III, where he spoke of the believer's ascending upward unto the point where he would be *absorbed* into Christ: "Be aware that as someone's flesh is progressively and gradually mortified by faith, he progressively ascends to oneness with Christ, so that he is absorbed into Christ by a deep union—to the extent that this is possible on [this pilgrim's] pathway."<sup>175</sup> Similarly, Nicholas's talk about the believer's *arising as Christ*,<sup>176</sup> about his being *transformed into Jesus*,<sup>177</sup> and about his *existing in Christ Jesus as Christ*<sup>178</sup> was highly misleading. For it suggested a union so close that it passed over into an identity. Given the controversy that had been occasioned by Meister Eckhart's declaration that the man who loves to suffer for God's sake is "*in deum transformatus*"—a phrase that was condemned as heretical—even someone such as John Gerson exercised caution in his use of the word "*transformatio*."<sup>179</sup> Though Nicholas himself was incautious, a careful reading of *De Docta Ignorantia*, like a careful reading of *De Filiatione Dei*, discloses that he is teaching nothing unorthodox. For when he speaks more precisely, he speaks of being "transformed into Christ's *image*."<sup>180</sup> And though he mentions that believers shall arise as Christ and be transformed into adopted sons,<sup>181</sup> he additionally states that each believer's own being will be preserved.<sup>182</sup> Likewise, in *De Filiatione Dei* he declares that the intellect is the *likeness* of God,<sup>183</sup> but not a likeness which is an identity of nature.<sup>184</sup> To be sure, sonship is said to be a knowledge of God and of the Word (*notitia dei et verbi*)<sup>185</sup> and is said to transcend all comparative relation (*per transcendens omnium proportionum . . . ad puram intellectualem vitam*);<sup>186</sup> but it is a knowledge of God only as He is revealed in the Word;<sup>187</sup> and the pure intellectual life transcends all comparative relationships only in that it encounters a God who is ineffable and inconceivable.<sup>188</sup>

2.2.2. Nicholas's theme of sonship and deification is borrowed not only from Dionysius but also from Meister Eckhart. We know from *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* that Nicholas was familiar with many of Eckhart's works and that he regarded them as orthodox.<sup>189</sup> Moreover, traces of Eckhart's views can be located in Nicholas's own writings.<sup>190</sup> A good example of such a trace occurs in *De Ludo Globi*:

Cardinalis: Esto igitur ens esse omnium existentium complicationem. Tunc cum nullum ens sit, nisi in ipso sit entitas, certissimum esse vides deum eo ipso quod entitas est in ente, esse in omnibus. Et licet ens ipsum in omnibus quae sunt videatur, non est tamen nisi unum ens, sicut de uno et puncto dictum est. Nec est aliud dicere deum esse in omnibus, quam quod entitas est in ente omnia complicante. Sic optime ille vidit qui dixit: quia deus est, omnia sunt.<sup>191</sup>

In general, an interpreter must be cautious in linking Eckhart and Cusanus. For even when Nicholas borrows certain of Eckhart's themes, he develops them in ways that differ significantly from their development within Eckhart's framework. Regarding sonship, for example, Nicholas develops this theme without recourse to such Eckhartian declarations as the following: (1) that in the "spark" of the devout believer's soul, as truly as in Himself, God begets His only-begotten Son,<sup>192</sup> (2) that God begets the devout believer as His only-begotten Son,<sup>193</sup> (3) that the power in the soul of the devout believer co-begets the Son—co-begets Him in the power of the Father,<sup>194</sup> (4) that the devout believer is so one with God that He has power over God and can command God,<sup>195</sup> and (5) that God's love for the devout believer is necessitated by the divine nature.<sup>196</sup>

Nonetheless, in *De Filiatione Dei* Nicholas's entire account of sonship is inspired by Eckhart's teachings.<sup>197</sup> This same theme of sonship recurs in *De Visione Dei*, where Eckhart's influence is also detectable. In *De Visione Dei* 7, for instance, Nicholas introduces the example of a tree, whose seminal power is ultimately produced by the Divine Power, which is Absolute Power, or Absolute Cause. As the tree and its seminal power exist in their Cause they are this Cause. And, hence, in this Cause, i.e., in God, they are the cause of themselves.<sup>198</sup> This line of thinking, in *De Visione Dei* 7, is reminiscent of Meister Eckhart's: "And hence, in accordance with my being, which is eternal, I am cause of myself—but not in accordance with my

becoming, which is temporal."<sup>199</sup> But though Nicholas agrees with Eckhart that in God everything is God, he avoids the radicalness of Eckhart's further statement: "That God is 'God,' of that I am the cause."<sup>200</sup> So, in last analysis, even though Nicholas moderates Eckhart's extreme tone, traces of Eckhart's thought are still evident in his writings. Three last examples of such traces may be mentioned. First, the metaphor of God-as-infinite-sphere, a metaphor which plays a special role in *De Visione Dei* 8, was mediated to Nicholas through Eckhart.<sup>201</sup> (Indeed, the theme of God's vision looms large in Eckhart's works.) Secondly, Nicholas's distinction, in *De Filiatione Dei* 3 (63:4-9), between God as He is in Himself and God insofar as He is Truth, reflects Eckhart's distinction between *deitas* and *deus*.<sup>202</sup> For Nicholas states that "*veritas ipsa non est deus ut in se triumphat, sed est modus quidem dei . . .*": "Truth itself is not God as He is triumphant in Himself but is a mode of God . . ."<sup>203</sup> And, thirdly, the contrasting themes of *image* and *exemplar* loom so large in Eckhart's works that Nicholas's own development of these themes could not fail to owe much of its motivation to Eckhart.<sup>204</sup>

2.3. Nicholas's third sense of "*videre deum*" has to do with a creature's *existing*. For in *De Visione Dei* 10 Nicholas interprets a creature's seeing God as its receiving existence from God's sight. Since God's seeing is not other than His hearing, says Nicholas, His gaze may be said to speak, just as it may also be said to create. And the creature's coming into existence is its hearing the voice of God, its seeing God:

By Your Word You speak to all existing things, and You summon into being nonexistent things. Therefore, You summon them in order that they may hear You; and when they hear You, they exist. Therefore, when You speak, You speak to all; and all the things to which You speak hear You. You speak to the earth, and You summon it to [become] human nature; and the earth hears You, and its hearing is its becoming man.<sup>205</sup>

2.4. A final sense of "*videre deum*" concerns the speculative approach to God whereby one comes to discern that He is Absolute Power, Absolute Cause, Absolute Being—even though one cannot descry any positive, nonsymbolic content to these notions. In *De Visione Dei* 7, where Nicholas introduces the example of the nut tree, he does so in order to illustrate how he *sees* "Your Absolute Face to be (1) the natural Face of every nature, (2) the Face which is the Absolute

Being of all being, (3) the Art and Knowledge of everything knowable." In this chapter he speculates upon how the nut tree is an unfolding of a seed's power and upon how the seed is an unfolding of Omnipotent Power. The tree was enfolded in the power of the seed as an effect is present in its cause. Likewise, the seminal power is enfolded in God, who is its Cause.

This Beginning and Cause has within itself—qua Cause, and in an absolute and enfolded manner—whatever it gives to the effect. In this way I see that this Power is the Face, or Exemplar, of every arboreal species and of each tree. In this [Power] I see this nut tree not as in its own contracted seminal potency but as in the Cause and Maker of that seminal power. And so, I see that this tree is a certain unfolding of the seed's power and that the seed is a certain unfolding of Omnipotent Power.<sup>206</sup>

Nicholas is thus inviting us to view each thing as *created*, as pointing to a Maker, upon whom our intellect may reflect but into whose secret abode it may never enter.<sup>207</sup>

3. *Christology*. 3.1. If God can be known only in the manner in which He reveals Himself, and if He reveals Himself most fully in Christ, then Christ is the Supreme Mediator between God and man. But since Nicholas also believes that Christ is God Himself, he must explain how it is that Christ can rightly be said to *mediate*. His explanation remains orthodox, even though his theory is innovative and his terminology in many respects misleading. For example, his language sounds Nestorian when he writes: "I see that Blessed Jesus, the son of man, was most closely united to Your Son and that only by the mediation of Your Son, who is Absolute Mediator, could the son of man be united to You who are God the Father."<sup>208</sup> This statement sounds as if Nicholas meant the following: viz., that Jesus, who consisted of a human nature and a human person, was united to the divine person and nature of the second member of the Trinity, so that in Christ there are not only two natures—a divine and a human—but also two persons.<sup>209</sup> However, a careful reading of *De Visione Dei* shows that Nicholas's terminology, though misleading, does not commit him to any form of Nestorianism; for he nowhere—even outside of *De Visione Dei*—deviates from the view that in Christ there are two natures united in the one person of God the Son.<sup>210</sup> Moreover, in *Cribratio Alkoran* he suggests that Mohammed

was once converted to Nestorianism—a doctrine from which he, Nicholas, disassociates himself.<sup>211</sup> Another misleading statement is the following statement about Jesus: “*Verbum enim dei es humanatum, et homo es deificatus*.”<sup>212</sup> One way of translating this statement (viz., “For You are the Word of God made human; and You are a man made divine”) makes it sound as if the *homo*, or man, which was made divine were both a person and a nature.<sup>213</sup> And yet, the subsequent sentences in the passage attest that the reason Jesus is a deified man, or a humanified God, is that in Him a human nature and a divine nature (not a human person and a divine person) are united inexplicably. (Thus, the Latin statement is better rendered as “For You are the humanified Word of God; and You are the deified man.”)<sup>214</sup> To this extent Nicholas’s view is compatible with his earlier discussion in *De Docta Ignorantia* III and with his later statements in *Cribratio Alkoran*.

3.2. *Prima facie*, Nicholas’s Christology seems to be stated more consistently in *De Visione Dei* than in *De Docta Ignorantia*. For in *De Docta Ignorantia* III, 7 Nicholas spoke of Jesus’s human nature as both absolute and contracted—as a medium between what is purely absolute and what is purely contracted: “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.” This doctrine casts a strain upon the logic of the argument in *De Docta Ignorantia*;<sup>215</sup> and so, the fact that the doctrine does not reoccur in *De Visione Dei* or elsewhere seems to take on special importance. In *De Visione Dei* Nicholas speaks only of *God the Son* as Medium—as Absolute Medium.<sup>216</sup> In this way he seems to extricate himself from a set of conceptual problems. However, closer analysis will show that his extrication is only apparent. For according to *De Visione Dei* Jesus’s human nature is united *maximally* to God the Son—i.e., is united so closely that no closer union, short of identity, is possible: “The human nature that is most closely united to You [who are Father] . . . cannot be more closely united to the Medium than it is. For it cannot be immediately united to You. Therefore, it is maximally united to the Medium and yet does not become the Medium. Hence, although the human nature cannot

become the Medium (since it cannot be immediately united to You), nevertheless it is joined to the Absolute Medium in such way that nothing can mediate between the human nature and Your Son, who is the Absolute Medium. For if something could mediate between the human nature and the Absolute Medium, then the human nature would not be most closely united to You."<sup>217</sup>

Let us try to understand Nicholas's view more clearly, so that subsequently we may better discern the difficulties that beset it. Nicholas regards the second member of the Trinity, viz., God the Son, as having assumed a human nature into a personal union with His divine nature. As thus humanified, God the Son is the man Jesus, who may be called the deified man—the most highly deified of all sons of God, for He is Son through eternal begottenness, not through adoption. Moreover, Jesus is *son of man* (his body having been formed from the fertile purity of the Virgin Mother) in such way that He is also *Son of God* (having received His divinity from the Father). Since in Jesus the human nature is united to the divine nature, it is also united to God the Father, who is one nature with the Son. In Jesus the human nature and the divine nature are united in such way that the former may be said to exist in the latter and to be inseparable from it; for only such a union is a union so close that no closer union is either possible or conceivable.<sup>218</sup> Now, in this doctrine of hypostatic union, as Nicholas conceives it, a number of points are included. First of all, between the human nature and the divine nature in Jesus *there is no medium*.<sup>219</sup> These two natures are said to be united apart from any medium. In other words, the medium that Nicholas speaks of is a medium, not between the natures but between the human nature of Jesus and the person of the Father. In still other words, God the Son is the Medium between the assumed human nature and God the Father. In this sense God the Son is called *Absolute Mediator*; and this is the only sense of *Absolute Mediator* and *Absolute Medium* that Nicholas allows in *De Visione Dei*.

Secondly, Jesus's human nature is said to exist in His divine nature in such way that the human intellect is united to the divine intellect.<sup>220</sup> And since Jesus's human intellect understands all things and is the likeness of all things, all things—through their likenesses in Jesus's human intellect—are united to the divine intellect.<sup>221</sup> Thirdly,

the humanity of each man is united to God the Father through being united to Jesus's humanity.<sup>222</sup> But though each man is one in species with the man Jesus, not each is one in spirit, notes Nicholas.<sup>223</sup> Only those who are spiritually united with God the Father will merit the happiness of eternal life.<sup>224</sup> Fourthly, Nicholas maintains that just as Jesus is son of man and Son of God, so the human sonship is the closest image of the Divine Sonship.<sup>225</sup>

Therefore, just as an image between which and its exemplar a more perfect image cannot mediate exists most closely in the truth of which it is the image, so Your human nature, I see, exists in the divine nature. Therefore, in Your human nature I see whatever I also see in Your divine nature. But all this, which in the divine nature is the Divine Truth, I see to be in the human nature in a human way. Whatever I see to exist in a human way in You, Jesus, is a likeness of the divine nature. But the likeness is joined to its Exemplar without a medium, so that there can neither be nor be thought to be a greater likeness.<sup>226</sup>

Fifthly, the union between the two natures in Jesus, though a maximal union, is not an unqualifiedly maximal union, we are told. Only the Union between God the Father and God the Son—the Union which the Holy Spirit is—is an infinite and unqualifiedly maximum Union, for it is a Union qua essential identity, i.e., qua an identity of nature. By contrast, the union of a human nature with the Son of God does not involve an identity of natures, for neither nature is transformed into the other. So although this union is maximal in the sense that no closer union is possible apart from there being an essential identity, it is not an absolute union, even though the Son of God is the Absolute Medium. Sixthly and finally, Nicholas teaches, along with Meister Eckhart, that the union of the two natures in Christ transcends all temporality, so that in the order of eternity the human nature—which consists of a body and a soul and which, in the order of time, was assumed by God the Son—is never separate from God the Son.<sup>227</sup>

3.3. Nicholas's terminology and distinctions are no doubt initially confusing; and yet, if the intelligibility of traditional orthodox Christology be granted, then in the context of Nicholas's metaphysic of contraction his articulation of a Christology is not unintelligible. Still, it is not perfectly consistent with this metaphysic. For two metaphysical theses are among Nicholas's fundamental tenets: viz., that

"there is no comparative relation of the infinite to the finite"<sup>228</sup> and that "except for the Maximal Image (which is, in oneness of nature, the very thing which its Exemplar is) no image is so similar or equal to its exemplar that it cannot be infinitely more similar and equal."<sup>229</sup> Given these theses and given Nicholas's view that Jesus's humanity is finite—because no created nature, but only the divine nature, is infinite—then since the Maximal Image is the Son of God qua second member of the Trinity,<sup>230</sup> Jesus's human nature and whatever is in it in a human way cannot literally be called a likeness of the divine nature and cannot properly be called a likeness than which a greater likeness can neither *be* nor be conceived.<sup>231</sup> For Jesus's human nature, Nicholas has asserted, is united to the divine nature in such way that it is not essentially identical to the divine nature—i.e., in such way that it is not the Maximal Image. In accordance with thesis two, therefore, neither the human nature nor the human intellect can be a likeness than which no closer likeness to the divine nature or intellect is possible. Moreover, since in accordance with thesis one neither the human nature nor the human intellect bears a comparative relation to the divine nature, neither of them can rightly be called a *likeness* of the divine nature in any sense other than the sense of *symbolic likeness*. But if the likeness in question is only a symbolic likeness, then once again the conclusion follows that a closer likeness is possible; for a very close "literal likeness" between a finite image and a finite exemplar would be a closer likeness than the remote "symbolic likeness" between a finite image (viz., human nature and the things in it in a human way) and the Infinite Exemplar (viz., the divine nature). Nicholas, it might seem, could escape this incoherence only by arguing, as he did in *De Docta Ignorantia* III, 7, that Jesus's human nature is *plurimum absoluta*, as well as being *contracta*, so that it "is as a medium between what is purely absolute and what is purely contracted." But for him to argue in this way would expose him to the charge of introducing into *De Visione Dei* the analogous incoherence of *De Docta Ignorantia* III.<sup>232</sup>

4. *Paradox and Dialectic*. 4.1. Whatever incoherence may beset Nicholas's line of reasoning about Christ's two natures, this incoherence, unrecognized by Nicholas, should not be confused with the paradoxes that he deliberately propounds. That is, the paradoxical



articulations should not be dismissed as inconsistent deliberations or utterances. For such a dismissive judgment would fail to take into consideration the crucial interrelationship between paradox and dialectic. An example of paradoxical discourse occurs at the end of *De Visione Dei* 21: "Every happy spirit sees the invisible God and is united, in You, Jesus, to the unapproachable and immortal God. And thus, in You, the finite is united to the Infinite and Ununitable; and the Incomprehensible is apprehended with eternal enjoyment, which is a most joyous and ever-inexhaustible happiness." We have already noted some of the senses in which the invisible God is seen—and, thus, in which the unapproachable God is approached and the incomprehensible God apprehended. When Nicholas says that to the Ununitable God the finite is united, he is not contradicting himself. Rather, he is deliberately expressing himself in an unqualified way when what he means can be reexpressed nonparadoxically by adding qualifications. In the present instance what he means is what he stated earlier: Jesus's human nature, and through this nature whatever is finite, *is united* to God the Son; but it *is not united* to Him in an identity of nature, for whatever is finite cannot become essentially identical with God.

In assessing Nicholas's use of paradox, perhaps we may be helped by comparison with a statement from one of Dickens' novels: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . . ." This statement is far more striking than would be its expansion: 'It was in some respects the best of times; it was in other respects the worst of times.' Dickens expresses himself as he does in order to capture the attention and the imagination of the reader—in order to create a more vivid and provocative impression. Similarly, Nicholas's statement that "the finite is united to the Infinite and Ununitable" conjoins two *prima facie* inconsistent conceptions. And it conjoins them for two reasons: to foster in the reader's mind a sense of amazement and inquiry and to "summarize pithily," as it were, an elaborate series of nonparadoxical propositions. Accordingly, the given paradoxical expression is not beyond all understanding even though some of the propositions "summarized" by it may be beyond understanding, as Nicholas acknowledges when he writes: "I see You, Lord Jesus, to be, beyond all understanding, one person (*suppositum*), because You are one Christ."<sup>233</sup> Here Nicholas purports to understand *that* Jesus is

one person with two natures, but he admits to not understanding, because it is *super omnem intellectum*, how this union of natures in the divine person is possible.<sup>234</sup>

A further example may be taken from *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* 31-32, where Nicholas is responding to a criticism by John Wenck, Professor of theology at the University of Heidelberg: "The Adversary [i.e., Wenck] does not understand what theology is or what he is attacking or what he is saying. For example, because it is stated in *Learned Ignorance* that "God is not this thing and is not any other thing, but is all things and is not any of all things (which are the words of Holy Dionysius)," he says that the [expression] "is all things and is not any of all things" is self-contradictory; and he does not understand that in the mode of enfolding [God] is all things but that in the mode of unfolding He is not any of these things.' " Hereby Nicholas shows that the paradoxical expression in question was meant to be understood as tacitly accompanied by qualifiers. Moreover, he regards Wenck as someone who should have known, from a complete reading of *De Docta Ignorantia* and from familiarity with the writings of Dionysius, just what these qualifiers were. And he reproaches Wenck for his utter lack of comprehension. Nicholas's use of paradoxical expression is motivated not only by Dionysius but also by Anselm<sup>235</sup> and by Eckhart.<sup>236</sup> Like Eckhart, Nicholas, in *De Visione Dei*, works certain of these expressions into a dialectical line of reasoning, i.e., into a line of reasoning that draws its main impetus from the conceptual opposition that underlies the paradoxical expression. In *De Visione Dei* the primary oppositions are between the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal, the imaging and the exemplifying, the creatable and the uncreatable, the unequal and the nonequal, the immanent and the transcendent, the seeable and the unseeable, the revealable and the unrevealable, the contractible and the uncontractible, the mutable and the immutable, that which is able to satisfy and that which is not able to satisfy.

4.2. Perhaps the most highly dialectical chapter in *De Visione Dei* is Chapter 15. Here Nicholas pursues further the illustrative likening of the face of the icon to the Face of God. The icon's gaze is not confined to one perspective but is "infinite" in that it is not restricted to beholding a single onlooker, for it beholds all onlookers at once. And yet, to each onlooker the icon's gaze seems concentrated upon

him alone, as if it were limited by him, as if its direction were determined by his position. In accordance with the illustration of the icon, Nicholas had earlier inferred about God:

Your Face is turned toward every face that looks unto You. Your gaze, O Lord, is Your Face. Accordingly, whoever looks unto You with a loving face will find only Your Face looking lovingly upon him. And the greater his endeavor to look more lovingly unto You, the more loving he will likewise find Your Face to be. Whoever looks angrily unto You will find Your Face likewise to display anger. Whoever looks unto You joyfully will find Your Face likewise to be joyous, just as is the face of him who is looking unto You.<sup>237</sup>

Along similar lines, Nicholas now infers from the illustration that, as it were, the onlooker bestows form upon the Face of God—a Face whose features seem to be determined by the onlooker himself, who seems to see himself mirrored in God's Face. Here Nicholas draws upon his metaphor that the Divine Eye is a Mirror in which the images of all things are present; but now he adds that in this Divine Mirror the onlooker sees his own form.

And he judges the form seen in the Mirror to be the image of his own form, because such would be the case with regard to a polished material mirror. However, the contrary thereof is true, because in the Mirror of eternity that which he sees is not an image but is the Truth, of which the beholder is the image. Therefore, in You, my God, the image is the Truth and Exemplar of each and every thing that exists or can exist.<sup>238</sup>

Nicholas's line of reasoning plays upon the contrast between image and exemplar: what at first seems to be the image is really the exemplar; and what at first seems to be the exemplar, or original, is seen to be really the image. Thus, the one who looks unto God is said by Nicholas to come to see himself in God when he recognizes and contemplates the fact that he has received his form of being from God, the Form of forms. Thus, the form of his being is present in God as what is caused is present in its cause.<sup>239</sup> Accordingly, whoever speculatively beholds himself in God may perhaps behold what he initially takes to be the *image* of himself. But through further contemplation he can come to see that this image is really the truth, or exemplar, of which he the viewer is the image: "In You, my God, the image is the Truth and Exemplar of each and every thing that exists or can exist." For in God the image is not an image but is God Himself;<sup>240</sup> and, qua God, this "image," so to speak, is the Cause of

itself and all other things.<sup>241</sup>

Nicholas's dialectic now becomes heightened: "You, O God, worthy of admiration by every mind, You who are Light sometimes seem as if You were a shadow. For when I see that in accordance with my changing, Your icon's gaze seems to be changed and that Your countenance seems to be changed because I am changed, You seem to me as if You were a shadow which follows the changing of the one who is walking. But because I am a living shadow and You are the Truth, I judge from the changing of the shadow that the Truth is changed. Therefore, O my God, You are shadow in such way that You are Truth; You are the image of me and of each one in such way that You are Exemplar."<sup>242</sup> The last sentence is deliberately expressed in a paradoxical manner, for Nicholas does not repeat the word "*quasi*" ("as if") from the opening sentence. Nonetheless, he intends that this word be understood as tacitly present. God is not at all *shadow*, for in Him there is no darkness (I John 1:5). Yet, he sometimes *seems as if* He were a shadow insofar as His gaze does not desert the one who looks unto Him but rather follows him as closely as does his shadow. Indeed, says Nicholas, the man himself is a kind of living and moving shadow that sometimes judges Truth itself to be changed. But then, subsequently,

You show me, O Lord, that with respect to the changing of my face Your Face is changed and unchanged, alike: it is changed because it does not desert the truth of my face; it is unchanged because it does not follow the changing of the image. Hence, just as Your Face does not desert the truth of my face, so also it does not follow the changing of the changeable image. For Absolute Truth is Unchangeability. The truth of my face is mutable, because it is truth in such way that it is image; but [the Truth of] Your [Face] is immutable, because it is image in such way that it is Truth. Absolute Truth cannot desert the truth of my face. For if Absolute Truth deserted it, then my face, which is a mutable truth, could not continue to exist. Thus, O God, on account of Your infinite goodness You seem to be mutable, because You do not desert mutable creatures; but because You are Absolute Goodness, You are not mutable, since You do not follow mutability.<sup>243</sup>

So Nicholas concludes that God is not mutable even though He sometimes appears to us to be a mutable shadow: "You seem (*videris*) to be mutable . . . but . . . You are not mutable." In his dialectical style Nicholas sometimes avoids repeating the key words "*quasi*" and "*videris*" in order to heighten the effect of the interplay between the

motifs of mutability and immutability, image and exemplar, shadow and truth; yet, these keywords are meant to be understood as operative throughout Chapter 15.<sup>244</sup> Similarly, for stylistic reasons, he does not keep repeating the qualifications which he expects the reader to supply. When he exclaims "O my God, deepest Depth, You who do not desert creatures and, at the same time, do not follow them!"<sup>245</sup> his words have an impact that is achieved by their *not* being explicitly unpacked. For the reader himself has already been told enough to supply an answer to the engendered question: 'How is it possible that God does not desert and yet does not follow? How does He follow without following?'

The speculation in Chapter 15 now moves to its finale. Just as the one who looks unto God seems to see himself in God, and therefore to bestow form upon God, so he seems to bestow (facial) being, so that God, with respect to His (facial) being, is the created likeness of man. Previously, Nicholas remarked in Chapter 6: "A man can judge only in a human way. For example, when a man ascribes a face to You, he does not seek it outside the human species; for his judgment is contracted within human nature and does not, in judging, go beyond the affection that belongs to this contractedness. Similarly, if a lion were to ascribe to You a face, he would judge it to be only lionlike; an ox [would judge it to be only] oxlike; and an eagle [would judge it to be only] eaglelike."<sup>246</sup> In Chapter 15 this idea is developed further. In seeing our own image in God, we see God as formed in our image, see Him as our creaturely likeness. Moreover, God lends Himself to this imagery, says Nicholas, in order that we may love Him by loving our image in Him, since we cannot hate ourselves. At this point Nicholas's line of reasoning reflexes: "the likeness which seems to be created by me is the Truth which creates me," so that God is seen *not to be my* image but I am seen to be *His* image. But if I love God when He seems to be an image-of-me that I have begotten, then I should love Him all the more when I see myself to be an image-of-Him that He has begotten.

4.3. Nowhere in *De Visione Dei* does Nicholas use the word "*paradoxa*"; and yet, *De Visione Dei* is replete with paradoxical expressions. God is infinite; and infinite goodness is not goodness, he asserts.<sup>247</sup> Nonetheless, he continues to refer to God as maximal goodness,<sup>248</sup> as infinite good,<sup>249</sup> as goodness itself.<sup>250</sup> God is good-

ness which is not goodness: i.e., He is symbolized as if He were goodness in some sense analogous to our conception of it. Elsewhere Nicholas speaks of God as both moved and stationary—and as neither moved nor stationary.<sup>251</sup> Or again, God seems to create Himself, even as He sees Himself, since His seeing is creating; thus, He is both creator and creatable.<sup>252</sup> Yet, He neither creates nor is creatable, although all things are that which they are because He exists.<sup>253</sup> His infinite Equality is equal to all things in such way that it is equal to none.<sup>254</sup> His trinity is a plurality without plural number.<sup>255</sup> He is the revealed but unrevealable vision.<sup>256</sup>

Each of the foregoing statements, like the ones mentioned still earlier, is equivalently translatable into a conjunction of nonparadoxical propositions. Moreover, like the earlier paradoxical utterances these too are non-self-contradictory: they merely have a surface appearance of self-contradictoriness because of their syntactical form. Even when Nicholas speaks of God as surrounded by the coincidence of contradictories,<sup>257</sup> he does not mean that God acts in ways that defy all intelligibility or that He is rightly conceivable in accordance with an inconsistent description. Rather, the expression indicates that God's being is uniquely beyond all actual and conceptual differentiation, so that it cannot be truly and nonmetaphorically characterized by any predicate whose meaning is drawn from human experience.<sup>258</sup> At times Nicholas makes this same point in reverse fashion—i.e., by asserting that *all* terms are predicable of God. In *De Possest* 12, for example, Bernard remarks: "Beware lest you contradict yourself. For a moment ago you denied that God is sun; and now you are asserting that He is all things." And Nicholas replies:

On the contrary! I affirmed that God is sun—though [He is] not [sun] in the same way as is the visible sun, which is not what it is able to be. For, assuredly, He who is what (He) is able to be does not fail to have solar being; rather, He has it in a better way, because [He has it] in a divine and most perfect way.<sup>259</sup>

Even in *De Visione Dei* 13 (54), where Nicholas indicates that a contradiction is implied by the claim that God is an End without an end, i.e., is an Infinite End, he is talking about contradiction in the context of the coincidence-of-contradictories. And his point, therefore, is not that the statement "God is an Infinite End" is self-contradictory. Rather, he is maintaining that we cannot conceive pos-

itively of God's infinity, in which contradictories coincide.<sup>260</sup> Though we can conceive *that God is Infinity*, we cannot conceive of Infinity as it is in itself.<sup>261</sup> "Infinite End" implies a contradiction insofar as Infinity cannot be "ended." But Nicholas leaps beyond this surface contradiction to the deeper point about coincidence and inconceivability. Accordingly, though he says "You are an End without an end—i.e., an Infinite End" and then adds "This [fact] escapes all reasoning, for it implies a contradiction," his addition must be construed as only a preliminary step of dialectic. This step is tacitly meant to be surpassed in the course of the speculation, so that the one speculating will say what Nicholas already said in Chapter 12 regarding a preliminary apparent contradiction:

Although the wall of absurdity (viz., the wall of the coincidence of creating with being created) stands in the way, as if creating could not possibly coincide with being created (since to admit this coinciding would seemingly be to affirm that something exists before it exists; for when it creates, it *is*—and yet *is not*, because it is created), nevertheless *this wall is not an obstacle*.<sup>262</sup>

Subsequent to the words above, Nicholas goes on to explain why no genuine contradiction occurs. Similarly, the wall of the absurdity of an Infinite End *is not an obstacle*. But Nicholas leaves it to the reader to work out the details of the explanation as to why not.

4.4. At times the form of a given paradoxical statement of Nicholas's does *not* have the appearance, syntactically, of a self-contradiction. Instead, the paradoxicality arises from the statement in relation to the immediate context within which it is embedded—as when Nicholas asks, "How will You give Yourself to me unless You also give me to myself?"<sup>263</sup> It seems strange that God's giving Himself to me should require His giving me to myself—stranger still that in some way I *could be* given to myself. And yet, in the present instance Nicholas explains that God gives me to myself—grants me the power of self-possession—when he assists my reason in governing my senses. At a later period in the history of theology Søren Kierkegaard came to formulate explicitly an elaborate doctrine of paradox—distinguishing, for example, the absolute paradox and the divine paradox. But even Kierkegaard retained a Cusanlike notion of contextual paradox, as is made evident by a single example from *Fear and Trembling*: In the reconstructed narrative of the Old Testament account of Abraham and Isaac, Kierkegaard puts into Abraham's

mouth the words "All is lost but God is love." Neither the syntactical form nor the semantical interpretation of the sentence constitutes a self-inconsistency. And yet, the utterance is paradoxical in that it evinces a theological tension between two motifs. For how can God be love if all is lost? Or how can all be lost if God is love? Kierkegaard does not seek immediately to escape the dialectical tension between the motif of divine love and the motif of human despair. Rather, he accentuates the tension: Abraham believes simultaneously that all is lost and, yet, that God is love.<sup>264</sup> Just as Kierkegaard's conception of faith is more radical than Nicholas's in that it encompasses the notions of risk and of doubt, so his use of paradoxical expression is both more radical and more dramatic. Nonetheless, there are certain parallels between the two thinkers. When in the *Sickness unto Death* Kierkegaard asks whether despair is an advantage or a drawback, he answers that dialectically speaking it is both. This response constitutes a *prima facie* inconsistency, which is removed by the introduction of different respects: despair is an advantage insofar as the capability of despair marks human beings as superior to the brute animals; despair is a disadvantage in that it is a sickness that is symptomatic of spiritual death. This way of reasoning resembles Nicholas's own recourse to paradoxical language that is translatable into different respects.<sup>265</sup>

Dialectical reasoning, as it is present in *De Visione Dei*, is proleptic more of Kierkegaard than of Hegel.<sup>266</sup> For Nicholas's use of opposition does not proceed linearly from a most general category to progressively more specific categories. Nor is it interrelated as a series of triads: thesis-antithesis-synthesis (the synthesis becoming a new thesis). True, Nicholas and Eckhart foreshadow certain of Hegel's major tenets, as when they teach that the Infinite is manifested in and through the finite. Still, Nicholas takes these points from Dionysius and makes of them something quite different from their use within the Hegelian context of *Aufhebung*. Nicholas's dialectical reasoning, as evidenced from *De Visione Dei* 15, progresses programmatically and topically, not systematically. That is, Nicholas advances considerations that cohere with his overall viewpoint in *De Visione Dei*, but these considerations do not connect into a chain in which each link of reasoning is presumed to depend necessarily upon the preceding links. Rather, just as Dionysius had earlier proceeded by



tersely playing off opposing motifs and just as Kierkegaard was later to proceed in the same manner, only more starkly and more narratively, so Nicholas, being partly influenced by Eckhart, sets opposites in opposition. Still, he does not think of the opposition as altogether unmediated, since there is an Absolute Mediator who unites the finite to the Infinite, the temporal to the Eternal, the image to the Exemplar, the contractible to the Uncontractible. Sometimes Nicholas's propensity for paradoxical terminology misleads, as when he uses the expressions "Uncontractible Contraction,"<sup>267</sup> "Uncontracted Humanity,"<sup>268</sup> and "Human Nature per se"<sup>269</sup> to refer to God, who is—as Nicholas himself states—not contractible to anything.<sup>270</sup> Likewise, the phrase "Contradiction without contradiction"<sup>271</sup> might seem gratuitously perplexing. And yet, these locutions besuit Nicholas's style in *De Visione Dei*, for their *prima facie* obscurity serves to accentuate the hiddenness that is presumed to accompany mystical theology.

4.5. The beauty of Nicholas's style does not arise from elegance of expression in Latin, though the charming simplicity of his sentences in *De Visione Dei* contrasts strikingly with the cumbersome expressions of *De Docta Ignorantia* and with the aridness of *De Coniecturis*. The stylistic beauty of *De Visione Dei* arises from the effective use of simile and metaphor. The comparison between the face of the icon and the Face of God is pleasingly ingenious—as is the address: "O good Jesus, You are the Tree of Life in the Paradise of delights. For no one can be nourished by the desirable Life except from Your fruit. You, O Jesus, are the food forbidden to all the sons of Adam, who, expelled from Paradise, seek in the earth, wherein they labor, their means of life."<sup>272</sup> Just as, subsequent to their sin, Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden and prevented from partaking of the Tree of Life, so those of their descendants who remain unrepentant are also not allowed to partake of the Tree of Life, now identified by Nicholas with Christ. Other of Nicholas's comparisons are no less vivid: his metaphor of the wall of absurdity, his likening of God to an uncountable treasure, to an Infinite Eye, to the Mirror-of-eternity. *De Visione Dei* is Nicholas's sole literary masterpiece. It stands as an illustrious witness to the fact that philosophical content can best be communicated when it affiliates itself with a conducive literary style.

5. *Textual and Translation Considerations.* 5.1. The present volume contains a new edition of the Latin text of *De Visione Dei*. This edition was prepared from the eighteen manuscripts cited in the accompanying critical apparatus. Together, these manuscripts furnish the basis for a reliable reconstruction of Nicholas's work, even in the absence of other copies that are known to be missing. Four additional manuscripts—Magdeburg 166, Minneapolis Z193N519/OD, Graz 910, and Vatican City 11520—were examined; but because of their inferior quality, their variant readings were not included in the line notes to the Latin text.<sup>273</sup> Within the eighteen manuscripts compared, the hands of the various redactors have been distinguished insofar as possible.<sup>274</sup> (For example, in Eisleben 960, the hands of *E*<sup>2</sup>, *E*<sup>3</sup> and *E*<sup>4</sup> are distinguished from the hand of the main copyist *E*.) Such redactors do not in every case improve the quality of the manuscript by their corrections—not even if one of the redactors should turn out to be the author himself.<sup>275</sup> In Codex Cusanus 219, for example, *C*<sup>2</sup> corrects a subsequently illegible word in the text to “*domine*”, when the right word is “*omnem*” (at 24:1). Similarly, at 47:4 *C*<sup>2</sup> corrects “*futili*” to “*futilis*”, when the right word is “*fictilis*”. By contrast, other emendations, though not obviously wrong, represent a departure from the original. Thus, between the end of 1:15 and the beginning of 2:1 *C*<sup>3</sup> inserts the title “*Prefacio*”<sup>276</sup>. And at 63:1, where *C* had “*esse infinitas*”, *C*<sup>2</sup> deletes “*esse*” instead of changing “*infinitas*” to “*infinitatis*”.

The present edition, on the basis of the manuscripts compared, makes such important determinations as the following: (1) At 24:16 the preferable reading is “*speciei*” (not “*faciei*”). (2) At 25:7 the correct punctuation is “. . . *exemplar sui ipsius. Et arboris et seminis tu, deus, . . .*” (instead of “. . . *exemplar sui ipsius et arboris et seminis. Tu, deus, . . .*”). (3) At 40:7-8 “*Et quia synonyma sunt videre tuum et loqui tuum*” should be included in the text, even though these words are deleted by *C*<sup>2</sup>. (4) At 79:12 the correct reading is “*pluralitas*” (not “*unitas*”). Although this list could be extended, these few examples will suffice to show why a critical edition is required—why, for instance, a mere transcription of *C* or of *p* would be less than fully desirable. Of the eighteen manuscripts compared, no single one is of overriding authority. Even *C*, though it is a copy that was commissioned and checked by Nicholas himself, contains a

modest number of errors.<sup>277</sup> Likewise, even though the copy of *De Visione Dei* contained in *G* (=Giessen 695) may be the earliest extant transscription,<sup>278</sup> overriding weight cannot be assigned to it. For we have no evidence that *G* was transcribed directly from the autograph, which has not survived. Given the large number, and the diverse ranges, of the variant readings in the eighteen manuscripts, it is not possible to construct a *memoria libelli* without introducing unreliable conjectures.<sup>279</sup> Because no single one of the manuscripts is of pre-emptive authority, no set of rigid a priori rules for determining the critical text can be acceptable.<sup>280</sup> The only mandatory a priori rule is the following editorial rule-of-thumb: be prepared to justify, with regard to the edition of the Latin text of *De Visione Dei*, all readings that deviate from the text in *C*. These justifications, if solicited, will have to draw upon considerations which will not be universally and uniformly applicable but which will tend to vary from case to case. For example, the considerations that justify an editor's inserting the Latin word "*imagine*" into the text at 2:3 will be different from the considerations that justify his rejection of the division title "*Praefatio*" between 1:15 and 2:1 or his choice of "*quin*" (instead of "*quae . . . non*") at 10:12 or his selection of "*ibi amor ubi oculus*" (instead of "*ibi oculus ubi amor*") at 11:3.

5.2. Besides determining which readings to accept for the edition he is preparing, an editor must also determine just what words are contained in each manuscript and how these words are to be grouped into sentences. The accuracy of these determinations is endangered by four conditions that characterize many medieval manuscripts: (1) the letters *n* and *u*, *c* and *e*, *f* and *s* are not clearly and distinctly formed; (2) the letter *i* is not everywhere dotted; (3) no space is left between a preposition and the noun it governs; (4) no punctuation within the manuscript indicates the end of one sentence and the beginning of another. Even experienced editors must guard against misreading "*nos*" as "*vos*", "*nostri*" as "*vostri*", "*in eo*" as "*meo*", "*in te*" as "*vite*", "*sit*" as "*sic*", "*a deo*" as "*adeo*", "*ex eo*" as "*exeo*", "*quem*" as "*que in*", "*meus*" as "*mens*", "*huic*" as "*hinc*", "*per te*" as "*parce*", "*sint*" as "*fuit*", "*in deo*" as "*video*", "*mover*" as "*monet*", "*una in*" as "*unam*", etc. Moreover, many *abbreviations* are look-alikes when handwritten:  $\overline{su}/\overline{sn}$  (*sum/sine*),  $\overline{no}/\overline{vo}$  (*nomen/verbo*),  $\overline{sp\dot{m}}/\overline{sp\dot{u}}$  (*spiritum/spiritui*),  $\overline{cu}/\overline{eu}$  (*cum/eum*),  $\overline{qu\dot{u}}/\overline{q\dot{m}}$  (*quin/quo-*

niam), *ōms/ōnis* (*omnes/omnis*), *ōe/ēe* (*omne/esse*). Even the medieval copyists themselves often mistook one another's handwriting, thereby introducing new errors into their transcriptions. By not insisting upon unambiguous letter formation, word spacing, and sentence punctuation, the medieval grammarians, together with the directors of the medieval scriptoria, condemned the scholarly world to unnecessary misapprehensions. Sometimes these misapprehensions are relatively harmless, as when the scribe of Ms. *O* writes "*ui*" in place of "*et*" (29:6) or "*carpere*" in place of "*capere*" (64:1) or "*enim*" in place of "*etiam*" (98:12). At other times they are more grave, as when he writes "*non*" in place of "*hoc*" (36:4) or "*mocione*" in place of "*monicione*" (16:13).<sup>281</sup>

5.3. The earlier English translation of *De Visione Dei* made by Emma G. Salter<sup>282</sup> and published in 1928 in New York and London is not without merit. (It is superior to the one made by Giles Randall and published in 1646.) Yet, it suffers from four deficiencies. First of all, it contains all the inadequacies which any translation based upon the Basel edition of 1565 is destined to have.<sup>283</sup> For example, in Chapter 11 Salter's translation of 47:15-16 reads:<sup>284</sup> "For the creature, to go forth from Thee is to enter into the creature, and to unfold is to enfold." But the Basel edition, like the Paris edition which it follows, omits the words "*in te*". When these words are restored, the translation changes significantly: "For creation's going out from You is creation's going in unto You; and unfolding is enfolding." Or again, in Chapter 21 (94:14-15) Salter's translation, in correspondence with the Basel edition, reads: "None of the blessed can see the Father in Paradise save with Thee, Jesu." However, a critical edition should exclude the word "*patrem*", which is present in the Basel and the Paris editions, and should have "*felicem*" instead of "*foelix*", or "*felix*", so that a correspondingly correct translation would be: "No one can see anyone happy, except inside Paradise with You, Jesus." Or again, in Chapter 6, at 19:16-17, the Paris and the Basel editions omit the words "*quacumque facie. Ideo aequalis omnibus et singulis, quia nec maior nec minor*", with the result that no translation thereof occurs in Salter's work.<sup>285</sup> At 44:4-6 (Chapter 10) the words "*ille non est omnipotens conceptus—sicut ille oculus qui prius unum videt et postea aliud*" are missing from the Paris edition and, hence, also from the Basel edition; accordingly, not only were these words not

translated by Salter but even the defective Latin sentence that *was* correctly translated, wrongly presents Nicholas's thought. At 47:8-9 (Chapter 11) the important sentence "*Cum te reperio virtutem complicantem omnia, intro*" is also not translated, for it too is missing from the Basel edition, though not from the Paris edition.

Secondly, Salter's translation neglects to render into English certain Latin words and phrases that are not omitted in the Basel edition. At 13:6-7 (Chapter 4), for example, "*non . . . nisi . . . nisi*" should be translated by the English words "only": "And Your seeing is only Your enlivening, only Your continually instilling . . ." <sup>286</sup> In the same chapter, at 12:15-16, a decision must be made about the Latin syntax—about how to understand the grammatical construction governed by "*non nisi*". <sup>287</sup> (From *De Docta Ignorantia* we know that Nicholas is not careful regarding his use of this construction.) <sup>288</sup> Yet, Salter ignores the words "*non nisi*" with her rendition (p. 17) ". . . when all my endeavour is turned toward Thee because all Thy endeavour is turned toward me . . ." Or again, at 47:7 of Chapter 11 Salter ignores the important word "*simul*"—thereby writing (on p. 53) ". . . and as I go in and go out by this door of Thy word . . .," instead of ". . . and when at one and the same time I go in and out through the door of Your Word . . ."

Salter's translation also suffers in a third respect: viz., it often fails to make clear the logical connection between Nicholas's thoughts. Thus, at the beginning of Chapter 14 her translation omits the word "therefore", which corresponds to "*igitur*", the logical connective between the first and the second Latin sentence. Likewise, at 56:4-6, in Chapter 13, Salter neglects the transition words "*enim*" and "*ideo*", so that her translation reads "Absolute infinity includeth and containeth all things. If infinity could ever exist . . ." instead of reading "For Absolute Infinity includes and encompasses all things. And so, if there were 'Infinity' . . ." At 65:21-22 (Chapter 15) Salter translates the adversative word "*sed*" by the causal word "for," thereby altering the logical relationship between two independent clauses. <sup>289</sup>

Finally, Salter's translation contains certain outright errors that are of sizable import to Nicholas's Christology and trinitarianism. The title of Chapter 17, misspelled in the Basel edition ("*Quod Deus, non nisi unitrinus, videri perfecte potest*"), should be rendered not as "How God, unless He were one and Three, could not be perfectly

seen" but as (something like) "God can be seen perfectly only as triune." At 77:12-13 of this same chapter the Salter translation has "Thus the essence is triune, and yet there are not three essences therein, since it is most simple."<sup>290</sup> However, the word "triune" should be changed to "trine"; and "essences" should be changed to the more general term "things", for "*tria*", which is neuter plural, does not allude to "*essentiae*". At 77:17 Salter has "There is no numerical distinction between the three, for plural number is essential to distinction . . .";<sup>291</sup> but she ought rather to have (something like) "Therefore,<sup>292</sup> there is not a numerical distinction of the three, because a numerical distinction would be an essential distinction . . . ." The opening sentence<sup>293</sup> of Chapter 20, "Thou showest me, O Light unfailing, that the perfect union whereby human nature is united through my Jesus with Thy divine nature is not in any wise like unto infinite union", would be more accurately translated if "perfect union" were changed to "maximum union", if "human nature" were changed to "the human nature", and if "through my Jesus" were changed to "in my Jesus". Nicholas does not assert, but rather denies, that *through Jesus* (the) human nature is united to the divine nature: "O most sweet Jesus, You cannot be said, either, to be the uniting medium between the divine nature and the human nature, since between the two natures there cannot be posited a middle nature that participates in both."<sup>294</sup> At 88:15-16 of Chapter 20 Salter's translation takes no account of the immensely important word "*eius*," so that it reads "This union, then, of human nature, as such, with the divine is the greatest"<sup>295</sup> instead of reading "Therefore, the union of His [i.e., Jesus'] human nature, qua human, to the divine nature is maximal . . . ." Thus, her translation fosters the misimpression that in Jesus human nature qua unindividuated species is united to God. This misimpression is further fostered by the translation of "*Verbum enim Dei es, humanatum, et homo es, deificatus*" as "For Thou art the Word of God humanified, and Thou art man deified"<sup>296</sup> instead of as "For You are the humanified Word of God; and You are the deified man."

At 90:7-8 of Chapter 20 the translation should not be "A stone existeth not in human understanding as in its proper cause or nature, but as in its specific idea and likeness"<sup>297</sup> but rather (something like) "A stone is not present in the human intellect as it is present in its

cause or its own rational principle but as it is present in its image and likeness." Similarly, in the sentences that immediately follow the foregoing one the Latin word "*species*" should be rendered not by the English word "species" but rather by "image". Accordingly, Salter's translation "So<sup>298</sup> in Thee, Jesu, Master of masters, I see that the absolute idea of all things, and with it what resembles it in species, are united in the highest degree"<sup>299</sup> should instead be (something like) " . . . in You, Jesus, Master of masters, I see that the Absolute Idea of all things and the resembling image of these things are likewise most closely united."<sup>300</sup> For nothing resembles the Absolute Idea (i.e., the Word of God) in species, since the Absolute Idea infinitely transcends all species. Toward the beginning of Chapter 23 the following translation by Salter does not accurately convey Nicholas's argument: "Nor can any nature by reason of its union with the divine pass over into another nature: as is illustrated in the case of the image, when united unto its truth. For an image cannot be said to become other when thus united, but rather to withdraw itself from otherness, because it is united unto its own truth, which is unchangeableness itself."<sup>301</sup> But what Nicholas means is something significantly different: "Nor would any nature on account of its union to the divine nature pass over into *another* nature (as when an image is united to its truth). For in the case of that passing over, the nature could [rightly be said] to recede from otherness but could not [rightly] be said to be altered, because it would be united to its own Truth, which is Unalterability itself." Thus, Nicholas does not make a *general* point about the relationship between images and their respective exemplars. Indeed, the point he makes entails a proposition which is opposed to the meaning that is found in Salter's translation; for it entails that ordinary kinds of images *would* rightly be said to be altered if they could somehow become transformed into their respective exemplars.

So the immediately foregoing examples show that Nicholas's Christology and trinitarianism are not accurately captured by Salter's translation of *De Visione Dei*.<sup>302</sup> And when taken all together, the four objections to her translation evidence amply the need for a new English version based upon a critical edition of the Latin text.

6. *Nicholas of Cusa and the Modern Age*. 6.1. Frederick Copleston, in Volume III of his well-known *History of Philosophy*, writes:

"Nicholas of Cusa is not an easy figure to classify . . . . But it seems to me preferable to see in him a transition-thinker, a philosopher of the Renaissance, who combined the old with the new."<sup>303</sup> This statement witnesses to the difficulty of determining Nicholas's place within the course of Western thought. For Nicholas is indeed a transitional figure, whose thought belongs to the larger cluster of intellectual boundary points that marks the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of Modernity. Some interpreters, such as Heinrich Rombach, view his thought as so epoch-making that he deserves to be called "the Aristotle of Modern Thought."<sup>304</sup> Others, such as Hans Blumenberg, detect in his writings primarily a concern for the continuance of the medieval epoch.<sup>305</sup> Blumenberg concedes that Nicholas does not explicitly articulate this concern; he insists, however, that the unity of Nicholas's thought can be understood only on the basis of such a concern.<sup>306</sup> Blumenberg recognizes, on the one hand, that Nicholas does not want to restore the world of Scholasticism, and, on the other, that Nicholas's writings contain a newness and a vividness, as indicated by their many neologisms. But Nicholas's constructive effort, thinks Blumenberg, does not minimize the fundamental conservatism of his central undertaking: viz., the saving of the Middle Ages.<sup>307</sup>

6.2. Though certain of Blumenberg's instincts seem right, his overall picture of Cusanus is wrong. (This wrongness does not, however, entail that Rombach's picture is correct.)<sup>308</sup> The many reasons supporting this judgment are now worth marshalling, since Blumenberg's massive work *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* has now been published in English translation (*The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*)<sup>309</sup> and is bound to have wide influence in British and North American academic circles. The translation was not made from the 1966 edition of the German text but rather from a revision thereof that was published as three paperback volumes.<sup>310</sup> Let us concentrate, for our present purposes, upon Part IV, Chapter 2 of the English translation—a section which corresponds to Part II of the third paperback volume. In general, the quality of the English translation is high, given Blumenberg's convoluted style. Still, there are crucial slips. On pp. 490-491, for example, the following translation is erroneous: "The curvature of the circle (which decreases as the radius increases) approaches identity with the curvature of a straight line, so that the



circle's radius and its circumference coincide." But, of course, a straight line has no curvature (both according to Nicholas and according to common-sense), so that the doctrine of *coincidentia oppositorum* becomes distorted by the translation. The translator, has construed "*der Geraden*" as a genitive instead of, correctly, as a dative. Another faulty rendering occurs on p. 489: "Anselm conceals this dilemma in his *Proslogion*, in whose first chapter he offers his much disputed<sup>311</sup> proof . . . ." Here the translator has not recognized that the word for "chapter" is plural ("*in dessen ersten Kapiteln*"). Thus, he saddles Blumenberg with an error. For although Anselm's argument appears in the first chapters of the *Proslogion*, it does not appear in Chapter 1 but in Chapter 2 and following. Likewise, the first sentence of the first new paragraph on p. 501 should be changed to something like: "In the following respect faith and conjecture, *fides* and *coniectura*, are shown to be functionally equivalent: they provide reason with the presuppositions it needs in order to arrive at conclusions within the total system." On p. 514, lines 11-12, the verb "to experience" should be replaced by "to detect" ("*spüren*"); for Blumenberg does not make the unintelligible claim that, according to Nicholas, man can *experience* the infinity of the finite. Or again, the words "motive" and "motives" on p. 484 (lines 22 and 31) should be changed to "motif" and "motifs".

On p. 514 the Latin passage<sup>312</sup> is mistranslated as: "And so you understand that the world, than which no magnitude can be greater, is contained in a point, than which nothing can be smaller, and that its center and circumference cannot be seen." The two occurrences of "can be" should be changed to "is", for Nicholas does *not* teach that no magnitude can be greater than the world. Rather, he teaches in *De Docta Ignorantia* that although God could not have created *this* world, with *its* possibility, to be greater than it is, he could nonetheless have created a greater world than this one.<sup>313</sup> Similarly, no physical point, he believes, is ever so small that there could not be one still smaller. On p. 531 the translation of "*Sicut voluisti, fecisti*" as "Just as He wanted it, He made it" is mistaken, though without grave consequence. Also without serious consequence is the faulty translation of "*vero*" as "truly," instead of as "but", on p. 499. The title "*De ignota litteratura*", on p. 494, should be rendered as "*On Unknown Learning*" instead of as "*On Ignorant Erudition*"; this

fact becomes clear when one reads the treatise itself, where John Wenck explains his title. Likewise the title "*On God's Vision*", on p. 538, would more correctly be rendered as "*On the Vision of God*"; for Nicholas intends the Latin title ("*De Visione Dei*") to indicate not only God's vision of man but also man's vision of God. An acceptable translation, therefore, will retain the ambiguity of the Latin, as does the German translation "*Vom Sehen Gottes*". On p. 500 the title "*De coniecturis*" is translated by the singular "*On Conjecture*". By contrast, it appears on p. 533 in the plural "*On Conjectures*". And on p. 526 it is written as "*On conjectures*". Similarly, on p. 507 the Latin title of Nicholas's major work of 1440 is translated as "*Of Learned Ignorance*"; but on p. 543 the same reoccurring German translation of the same reoccurring Latin title is translated into English as "*On Knowing Ignorance*". Moreover, there are difficulties of style—as evidenced by the following opaque renderings:<sup>314</sup> "This sort of transcendence is thus an intrahistorical reservation . . ." (p. 486).<sup>315</sup> "In this passage, a Platonizing exemplarism conflicts with the absolutism of will that is supposedly owed to the sovereignty of the Divinity . . ." (p. 520).<sup>316</sup> "Precisely because and if it was the case that God indulged in this self-referential behavior, His work had in the highest degree to give to each being what belonged to it" (p. 516).<sup>317</sup> Finally, and of no small importance, Blumenberg's references are mistranslated where they make use of the abbreviation "p."—as in "Wenck, *De ignota litteratura*, p. 35." The English translator does not realize that "p." here stands for the Latin word "*pagina*" (i.e., "page"), and so he everywhere misrenders it by the English abbreviation "par." (i.e., "paragraph").

In spite of these and other mistakes and infelicities the quality of Robert Wallace's translation is reasonably high. Indeed, only someone unfamiliar with the many problems and pitfalls of the art of translating could judge otherwise. All translations of lengthy and weighty philosophical works inevitably contain mistakes. These can be eliminated only over a long period of time by the collective efforts of many different scholars, each spotting some things that the other misses (and missing some things that the other spots).

6.3. Yet, even apart from the considerations of English translation, Blumenberg's work is beset by problems that are the author's own. Let us look briefly at some of the *scholarly* problems before turning

to assess Blumenberg's analysis of Nicholas's cosmology, anthropology, and Christology. To begin with, Blumenberg has certain mistranslations of his own. On p. 92 of Vol. III of the German paperback edition (*Aspekten der Epochenschwelle: Cusaner und Nolaner*) he both misstates and mistranslates the Latin text cited from *De Coniecturis* II, 14. For his excerpt "*omnia ex se explicare intra regionis suae circulum, omnia de potentia centri exercere*" contains the word "*exercere*" instead of the correct word "*exerere*" (or "*exserere*"); and, in addition, he takes "*intra regionis suae circulum*" to mean "*in den Kreis seines Lebensbereiches hinein*" instead of "*innerhalb des Umkreises seines Lebensbereiches*".<sup>318</sup> On p. 97 of the German volume, which corresponds to p. 537 of the English, Blumenberg once again misunderstands the Latin, for he writes: "*In der ersten der beiden Frühschriften [i.e., De docta ignorantia] ist das Thema der methodischen Verwendbarkeit ausdrücklich gestellt: die Mathematik verhilft uns am ehesten zum Erfassen der Andersartigkeit des Göttlichen. (Quod mathematica nos iuvet plurimum in diversorum divinorum apprehensione.)*" But the Latin title here in parentheses is taken from *De Docta Ignorantia* I, 11 and speaks not of the *Erfassen der Andersartigkeit des Göttlichen* but rather of the *Erfassen verschiedener Bereiche des Göttlichen*, as the very contents of I, 11 attest. Or again, Blumenberg's translation on p. 100 (corresponding to p. 540 of the English edition) goes astray: indeed, the sentences "*Du nütigst insofern meine Freiheit, als du nicht mein Eigentum sein kannst, wenn ich mir nicht selbst zu eigen bin. Du nütigst mich nicht, insofern du dies meiner Freiheit anheimgegeben hast, sondern du erwartest, dass ich selbst mich dafür entscheide, mir zu eigen zu sein*" do not capture Nicholas's meaning at the end of *De Visione Dei* 7. Blumenberg has not understood Nicholas's argument, and hence he mistranslates "*cum*" as "*insofern . . . als*" and mistranslates "*quia*" as "*insofern*".<sup>319</sup>

6.4. In another vein, both Blumenberg's use of Latin editions and his system of referencing is most unscholarly. He appears to use the Paris edition (1514) of the Latin text of *De Docta Ignorantia*, even though the critical edition by Hoffmann and Klibansky (1932) was available to him. In note 71, line 1, p. 169 of the German paperback (corresponding to p. 656, line 1 of n. 50 in the English edition) the Paris edition's "*sic quaelibet*" is misprinted as "*sic qualibet*" and is at

odds with Hoffmann and Klibansky's "*sicut quaelibet*". In line 1 of note 81 on p. 171 (corresponding to line 1 of n. 60 on p. 657 of the English edition) the verb "*sit*" is excised without any ellipsis marks to indicate an elision. As for other of Nicholas's texts: the Paris edition is also used for many of these in spite of the fact that the critical editions of the Heidelberg Academy were available. Indeed, Blumenberg has recourse to the Paris edition of *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* in apparent disregard of the fact that it deviates so extensively from the best manuscript tradition as it is recorded in Klibansky's critical edition. Thus, on p. 53 (English p. 500) he puts "... *quis credit se scire, quod scire nequit* ..." where the critical edition has "... *quis credit se scire, quod sciri nequit*". This difference is serious, because there is a vast discrepancy between asserting that a given human being cannot know something and asserting that no human being can know it.

At other times a reader is uncertain about just what edition Blumenberg is using, since most of Blumenberg's notes do not indicate the edition being referred to, so that the reader is left to draw his own conclusions. Note 27 on p. 166 (=n. 6 on p. 652 of the English text) seems to have reference to the Latin-German edition of *De Venatione Sapientiae* published by Felix Meiner Verlag in 1964, for the reference in the note reads "De venatione sapientiae XIV 41"; and "41", which does not appear in the Paris edition, is presumably the margin number in the 1964 publication. Yet, when we compare with this publication the Latin citation that is given by Blumenberg, we find the addition of the word "*sint*" in line 1; i.e., this word does not appear either in the Meiner edition or in the Paris edition. Blumenberg seems simply to have supplied it on his own without giving any indication of this fact. On the other hand, citations from *De Beryllo* seem to be drawn from the Paris edition. And yet, this observation is rendered uncertain by note 89 on pp. 171-172 (=n. 68 on pp. 657-658 of the English edition). Moreover, this note in the German volume differs from the corresponding note in the English volume. But no indication of this difference is anywhere indicated by the English translator-editor.<sup>320</sup> A reader is simply left to hazard his own explanatory surmises, just as he is left to figure out which Latin edition is being cited. Since the German edition's citation of the Latin text omits 13 words that are incorporated into the English edition's ci-

tation, the following surmise seems plausible: viz., that Blumenberg revised the Latin quotation for the English edition. Now, the words added are "*scilicet cur caelum caelum et terra terra et homo homo, nulla est ratio . . .*" The very first word, "*scilicet*", is not found in the Paris edition, which has "*sed*", but *is* present in the text of Leo Gabriel's edition, published in 1967 in Vienna. Might Blumenberg have been using this text? We cannot be certain, since in line 4 on p. 172 (=line 5, n. 68, p. 657 of the English edition), Blumenberg has "*qui*" instead of "*quod*", the word found in both Gabriel's edition and the Paris edition. Moreover, in line 1 of the same page (=line 3 of n. 68 in the English edition) Blumenberg has "*qua*" instead of "*quia*", the word found in the Paris edition, the Heidelberg Academy edition prepared by Ludwig Baur, the Latin-German edition prepared by Karl Bormann, and the text contained in the Gabriel edition. Surely a reader cannot be expected to trace through edition after edition in order to determine which edition Blumenberg is borrowing from and to what extent alterations have been made without being signaled or else the edition has been misquoted.

Other indications of Blumenberg's unscholarliness abound. Note 68 on p. 169 (=n. 47 on p. 655 of the English edition) consists of the reference "*De ludo globi I*". Besides there being no indication of the edition from which the Latin text is taken, the directions for locating the Latin passage are frustratingly vague. For *De Ludo Globi I* runs from folio 152<sup>r</sup> to folio 159<sup>v</sup> in Volume I of the Paris edition. This amounts to 16 pages—14 of which are each the equivalent of 2 ordinary-size printed pages. Equally vague is note 87 on p. 171 (=n. 66, p. 657 of the English edition), which gives as a reference "*De ludo globi II*". No less than the former reference, this one too retards a reader's attempt to locate the Latin passage that is being documented; for in the Paris edition *De Ludo Globi II* extends from folio 160<sup>v</sup> to folio 168<sup>v</sup>—the equivalent of 33 ordinary-size printed pages. Similarly frustrating are such impoverished references as "*Excitationes I*" (n. 86, p. 171 = n. 65, p. 657 of the English edition, which adds the words "*Paris ed.*") or "*Excitationes IX*" (n. 48, p. 168 = n. 27, p. 654 of the English edition, which also adds "*Paris ed.*"). In the latter instance, the word "*igitur*" is missing from the first line of the body of the note, and the subsequent ellipsis between "*forma*" and "*Credit*" eliminates a portion of Nicholas's text that is essential for

understanding the remainder of the quotation in the note. In the end, Blumenberg seems altogether unfamiliar with standard scholarly documentation requirements. It seems never to have dawned upon him that his reference in note 89 (=n. 68 of the English edition) to "De beryllo 29" needs to specify the edition if only because Chapter 29 in one edition might some day become Chapter 30 in another.<sup>321</sup>

6.5. The undisciplined character of Blumenberg's documentary procedures is paralysed by imprecisions in his historical judgments.<sup>322</sup>

6.5.1. Symptomatic of these imprecisions are the misprinting of Nicholas's dates as 1410-1464,<sup>323</sup> the unqualified claim that Nicholas attended the school of the Brethren of the Common Life at Deventer,<sup>324</sup> and the vagueness of the ascription "his [i.e., Nicholas's] fundamentally Scholastic realism regarding universals"<sup>325</sup>—as if "Scholastic realism" signified some uniquely identifiable position rather than being a rubric for cognate but incompatible theories. With regard to Anselm of Canterbury, Blumenberg asserts that in *Proslogion* 15 Anselm "speaks of two concepts of God, a rational one defined by the intensification of what is thinkable to the point of insurpassability and a transcendent one requiring one to go beyond the limits of what is thinkable. Transcendence withdraws the concept from definability."<sup>326</sup> But here again Blumenberg is imprecise. For in *Proslogion* 15 Anselm speaks only of *one* concept of God—the same concept that he advanced in *Proslogion* 2, viz., the concept of God as that than which a greater cannot be thought. And just as he pointed out in *Proslogion* 7 that such a being is omnipotent and in *Proslogion* 13 that it is unlimited and eternal, so in *Proslogion* 15 he points out that such a being is also greater than can be thought. Thus; in Chapter 15 he is continuing to unpack the concept of that than which a greater cannot be thought; he is not setting a second concept antithetically along side it. Indeed, in affirming that God is greater than can be thought, he does not mean that God is beyond all positive conception but simply that God is beyond comprehension. In other words, according to Anselm's *Proslogion*, God is reliably conceivable by us, but He is not perfectly conceivable by us; He is apprehensible, without being fully comprehensible.<sup>327</sup> Anselm later elucidates this point in response to Gaunilo's charge that God is altogether inconceivable *secundum rem*;<sup>328</sup> and in doing so, Anselm shows that he adheres to the method of *analogia*. So Blumenberg is wrong to suggest that

Anselm himself speaks of *two* concepts in Chapter 15—one that admits of definability and one that withdraws from definability; and a fortiori he is wrong in regarding these allegedly *two* concepts as constituting an *antinomy* for Anselm. Indeed, of no passage in the *Proslogion* is it true to say, as Blumenberg says, that “the medieval inventor of the [ontological] argument himself distinguishes between the God of his proof, than Whom nothing greater can be thought, and the God of his revealed faith, Who is greater than anything that can ever be thought.”<sup>329</sup>

Secondly, just as Blumenberg is wrong about Anselm's distinction between the God of his proof and the God of his faith, so he is also mistaken in judging that Anselm can eliminate the resulting discrepancy only by “an ‘ex post facto’ reinterpretation of the concept [of God], a projection of rationality into transcendence . . . .”<sup>330</sup> Thirdly, Blumenberg is wrong in implying that, for Anselm, the concept of God in *Proslogion* 2 is *definitional* of God.<sup>331</sup> Nowhere does Anselm call the expression “God is that than which a greater cannot be thought” a *definition*. Indeed, in *Reply to Gaunilo* 7 he shows clearly that he regards the expression as nondefinitional. For were the expression intended by Anselm to be definitional, he would not have allowed the possibility that someone could in some respect understand the expression while in no respect understanding the meaning (*sensus*) of the term “God.”

Fourthly, when Blumenberg bespeaks his own philosophical viewpoint, he often does so with statements of dubious merit—as on pp. 488-489, where he writes:

Anselm of Canterbury's (1033-1109) ‘ontological proof’ of God's existence from His concept already makes the antinomy manifest, since the concept of a highest being must be definable from positive predicates only, but the idea of transcendence precisely denies and excludes such predicates.

But here Blumenberg fails to distinguish the concept of a highest being from the concept of a highest *conceivable* being. Moreover, it is false that the concept of a supreme being must be definable solely from positive predicates. A supreme being might be definable in such way that among the defining predicates were “timeless.” But what would be the positive conceptual content signified by this predicate? On the other hand, it is also false that the idea of transcendence

denies and excludes all positive predicates. The concept of God could, for example, be defined in such way that the (positive) predicate "omnipotent"<sup>332</sup> was consistently included along with the (transcendence-indicating) predicate "timeless." The foregoing quotation from Blumenberg shows that, in a way, he has missed the ingeniousness of Anselm's reasoning in the *Proslogion*. For Anselm does not attempt to *define* the concept of God—does not attempt to determine a precise set of necessary properties that suffice to describe the Divine Being. His formula "*id quo maius cogitari nequit*" is more like a definite description. And Anselm regards it as entailing that God is whatever it is better to be than not to be—where "what it is better to be" is only partially unpacked in the *Proslogion*, and where there is included in this unpacking the further formula "*quiddam maius quam cogitari potest*." Finally, Blumenberg does not understand Anselm's *overall aim* in the *Proslogion*; for if he did, he would not allude to "Anselm's substitution of the highest thinkable thing for something beyond thought."<sup>333</sup> For Anselm does not *substitute* the former for the latter (or, more precisely, does not substitute the description of the former for the description of the latter). Nor can Anselm rightly be said anywhere to *replace* the concept of *quiddam maius quam cogitari potest* by the concept of *aliquid quo maius cogitari nequit*.

These five failings invalidate Blumenberg's interpretation of Anselm's *Proslogion*, thereby disqualifying his comparison between Anselm of Canterbury and Nicholas of Cusa.<sup>334</sup> Moreover, they lead to a sixth shortcoming: viz., the error of claiming that in the sermon "*Dies Sanctificatus*" Nicholas introduces a *transformation* of Anselm's ontological argument<sup>335</sup> when he, Nicholas, infers the existence of God, who is Truth, from the truth of any true proposition. In his footnote Blumenberg attenuates this claim, for no longer does he speak of Nicholas's reasoning as a *transformation* of Anselm's ontological argument; instead, he now says that it is "only *modeled on* the ontological proof that proceeds from the mere concept of God . . ."<sup>336</sup> However, the argument in Nicholas's sermon cannot be *modeled on* Anselm's argument for God's existence in the *Proslogion*, because the argument in the *Proslogion*—but not the argument in the sermon—has the structure of a *reductio ad absurdum*. Surprisingly, Blumenberg fails altogether to draw the comparison with Anselm's



reasoning in *Monologion* 18—reasoning repeated in *De Veritate* 1.

6.5.2. In a related vein, Blumenberg's criticism of Martin Grabmann is faulty:

At bottom, in spite of Grabmann's two-volume and incomplete work [*Die Geschichte der scholastischen Methode*], there never was such a thing as a *Scholastic method*. The transposition of the modern concept of method to the Middle Ages belongs among the supposedly justifying deobscurifications of the Middle Ages that were long held to be necessary. What was called the Scholastic method consists simply of formal prescriptions for disputation and the composition of treatises. It is not an epistemological method.<sup>337</sup>

Hereby Blumenberg shows, once again, that he does not understand the thought of the "Father of Scholasticism," Anselm of Canterbury. For, assuredly, Anselm has a *Scholastic method*. This method consists of the attempt to justify on an independent rational basis—i.e., to establish *sola ratione* and *rationibus necessariis* and *Christo remoto*—various truths of Scripture that are initially accepted on faith. The method is employed in the *Monologion*, the *Proslogion*, and the *Cur Deus Homo*. Naturally, what Anselm means by *ratio* must be carefully specified, since it does not coincide exactly with the contemporary notions of *ratio*. But even when we allow for the differences, we are not entitled to deny that he has a distinctive programmatic method that can rightly be called *Scholastic*. Of course, his method is associated with different styles of presentation and with various strategies of reasoning. The *Monologion* is a soliloquy, the *Proslogion* a prayerful address to God, the *Cur Deus Homo* a dialogue. Yet, Anselm regards each as proceeding *sola ratione* toward confirming the truths of faith.<sup>338</sup> Indeed, can anyone really not see the difference between Anselm's method in the *Cur Deus Homo* and Nicholas of Cusa's method in Book III of *De Docta Ignorantia* or Augustine's method in *De Trinitate* or Erigena's method in *De Divisione Naturae*? That Anselm's *programmatic method* is not reducible to a *particular method of arguing*, e.g., the method of *reductio ad absurdum*, does not entail that it is not a method and, a fortiori, not a Scholastic method or not an epistemological method.

6.5.3. The foregoing clarifications are essential to a correct historical understanding of St. Anselm's thought. Anyone who misapprehends the structure of his ontological argument and the overall aim of the *Proslogion*, anyone who neglects *Monologion* 18 and *De*

*Veritate* 1, anyone who fails to see that Anselm is proposing an epistemological method and not just offering "formal prescriptions for disputation and the composition of treatises"<sup>339</sup> will inevitably miscast the comparison between Anselm and Cusanus.

Having detected the looseness of certain of Blumenberg's textual and historical judgments, we may well wonder whether a similar looseness carries over into his treatment of Nicholas's cosmology, anthropology, and Christology. And the answer is clearly affirmative.

6.6. *Nicholas's Cosmology*. 6.6.1. To begin with, the very title of Chapter 2 of Part IV, viz., "The Cusan: The World as God's Self-Restriction"<sup>340</sup> is erroneous; and this error pervades the entire chapter. For Nicholas teaches that God is not at all contracted<sup>341</sup> and cannot become so; by contrast, everything other than God is contracted and cannot lose its contractibility.<sup>342</sup> Perhaps Blumenberg is being misled by the title of *De Docta Ignorantia* III, 1: "*Maximum ad hoc vel illud contractum, quo maius esse nequeat, esse sine absoluto non posse*" ("A maximum which is contracted to this or that and than which there cannot be a greater cannot exist apart from the Absolute [Maximum].") This title, rather than referring to the universe, refers to a maximum contracted to a species; but even so, the *divine nature* is never thought by Nicholas to be contracted. On p. 508 Blumenberg interprets Nicholas as maintaining that creation is "an act in which the essence of its Author must unavoidably be invested . . . ." But "invested" ("*investiert*") is entirely the wrong word, because Nicholas maintains that the essence of God cannot become mingled with His creation: the absolutely Maximum is "*incommunicabile, immersibile et incontractibile ad hoc vel illud . . .*"<sup>343</sup> The world, therefore, is not God in a contracted state.<sup>344</sup>

6.6.2. Blumenberg's misinterpretation is linked with his imprecisions about Nicholas's conception of the universe as privatively infinite:

It is true that for Nicholas of Cusa the new cosmology was nothing but the consequence, thought through to the end, of the old idea of creation. But what happened to man while the cosmos grew into the infinite with its Author? The step in metaphysical speculation by which finitude was suspended had as its consequence . . . that from then on the world was, as it were, 'on the point of' itself becoming divine . . . .<sup>345</sup>

This is exegetical nonsense—at least vis-à-vis Nicholas of Cusa, for whom the universe does not "grow into the infinite with its Author"

and for whom it was not the case either that "finitude was suspended" or that "the world was, as it were, 'on the point of' itself becoming divine." Nowhere does Blumenberg make unequivocally clear—as he ought to—that for Nicholas, both in *De Docta Ignorantia* and elsewhere, the universe is *finite*, though unbounded. Nicholas calls the universe privatively infinite because it is unbounded, not because it is not finite. Again and again Blumenberg slurs over this distinction, as if not rightly discerning it.<sup>346</sup> Further confusion and obfuscation occur on p. 531, where he ascribes to Nicholas the view that "will is the world aspect of the infinite . . . ,"<sup>347</sup> as if God had some world aspect or as if the expression "world aspect of the infinite" did not border upon the opaque. On p. 523 Blumenberg speaks imprecisely when he maintains that, for Nicholas, "the 'natures' of which the world is composed are in turn foldings together of the infinity of characteristics that are realized in the individuals of a kind."<sup>348</sup> For he should here indicate that the infinity of characteristics which he mentions can be only a potential infinity, not an actual infinity, according to Cusanus.<sup>349</sup> Yet, the words "are realized" give the impression that an actual infinity is meant. A further imprecision appears on p. 509, where Blumenberg remarks: "For the Cusan, without his admitting it, *complicatio* and *explicatio* stand in a relation of equivalence, in fact an equivalence of interiority, of emanation from a center from which everything real unfolds itself." However, according to Nicholas, *complicatio* and *explicatio* are decidedly *not* equivalent. For all that is unfolded from God is enfolded in God, but not all that is enfolded in God is unfolded from God.<sup>350</sup>

6.6.3. Blumenberg blunders historically when he asserts: "The conception of transcendence deriving from Platonism can be traced back to a *spatial* schema in which the primary assertion about the Ideas is that they are nothing in or of this world but rather are located outside and apart from it . . . ."<sup>351</sup> Hereby Blumenberg shows that he does not understand the doctrine of *chorismos eidōn* either as it derives from Plato or as it becomes transformed by Plotinus and passes into medieval Christian theology. For the Platonic Forms—such as the Form of Justice and the Form of the Good—are *not* spatial; they are not *located* in a domain beyond the earthly domain. Rather, they are altogether spaceless and immaterial, just as they are altogether timeless. They are beyond the world and separate from the

world but are not *spatially* beyond or *spatially* separate. Nor are they *represented* in spatial terms.

6.6.4. Blumenberg's statements on p. 520 constitute *un fatras d'idées mal comprises*.

6.6.4.1. On p. 520 he cites *De Venatione Sapientiae* 27 (81), where Nicholas, mentioning Dionysius, speaks of exemplars in the mind of God. But he fails to cite *De Venatione Sapientiae* 28, which indicates that there is only one Eternal Form (*aeterna ratio*), in which the specific forms (*rationes seu exemplaria*) of all other things participate.<sup>352</sup> He shows no signs of realizing that when Nicholas follows Dionysius in speaking of exemplars in the Divine Mind, the use of the plural is a *modus loquendi*. For Nicholas believes that the Mind of God is Absolute Oneness, enfolding all things absolutely. This belief does not, however, prevent him from speaking, plurally, of *things* enfolded in God and does not prevent him from *naming* them by their unfolded names. What occurs in *De Venatione Sapientiae* 27-28 is the same thing that occurs in *De Mente* 2-3. In *De Mente* 2 (67:4-7) Nicholas states unequivocally that

infinita forma est solum una et simplicissima, quae in omnibus rebus resplendet tamquam omnium et singulorum formabilium adaequatissimum exemplar. Unde verissimum erit non esse multa separata exemplaria ac multas rerum ideas.

But this denial of a plurality of exemplars, or ideas, does not prevent him from stating in the very next chapter—i.e., in Chapter 3 (73:1)—that “*omnia in Deo sunt, sed ibi rerum exemplaria . . .*”: “all things are present in God, but in God they are the exemplars of things . . .” Nicholas is not being inconsistent in these two chapters; he is simply speaking of the things that are enfolded in God *as if* they were manifold forms. These facts about Nicholas's view are already clear in *De Docta Ignorantia*. For in Book I, Chapter 24 he writes:

Who could understand the infinite Oneness which infinitely precedes all opposition?—where all things are incompositely enfolded in simplicity of Oneness, where there is neither anything which is other nor anything which is different, where a man does not differ from a lion, and the sky does not differ from the earth. Nevertheless, in the Maximum they are most truly the Maximum, [though] not in accordance with their finitude; rather, [they are] Maximum Oneness in an enfolded way.<sup>353</sup>

And this passage accords with *De Docta Ignorantia* II, 9 (148-150), where he makes such statements as the following: "the forms of things are not distinct except as they exist contractedly; as they exist absolutely they are one, indistinct [Form], which is the Word in God."<sup>354</sup> "Therefore, when it is said that God created man by means of one essence and created stone by means of another, this is true with respect to things but not true with respect to the Creator . . . ."<sup>355</sup> Just why Nicholas should on occasion speak plurally of exemplars in the Mind of God becomes more evident from a passage in *De Docta Ignorantia* II, 3: "Just as number arises from our mind by virtue of the fact that we understand what is commonly one as individually many: so the plurality of things [arises] from the Divine Mind (in which the many are present without plurality, because they are present in Enfolding Oneness). For in accordance with the fact that things cannot participate equally in the Equality of Being: God, in eternity, understood one thing in one way and another thing in another way. Herefrom arose plurality, which in God is oneness."<sup>356</sup> Here Nicholas's statement that God understood one thing in one way and another in another way is the equivalent of his elsewhere sometimes saying that exemplars are present in the Divine Mind—even though these so-called exemplars are really only one Exemplar, viz., the Word of God.

6.6.4.2. Blumenberg mentions none of the foregoing clarifications. Instead, he simply cites from *De Venatione Sapientiae* 27 Nicholas's mention of *exemplars*, in the plural, and judges it to be a remnant of Platonism that conflicts with the doctrine of God's absolute will. But then Blumenberg proceeds to make a *second* mistake—i.e., not only the mistake of "finding" the immediately preceding conflict (which is not actually present in Nicholas's texts) but also the mistake of "finding" a further conflict: viz., an inconsistency within Nicholas's doctrine of creation. In particular, Blumenberg judges the account in *De Venatione Sapientiae* to be in at least one important respect incompatible with the account in *De Docta Ignorantia*: "The Cusan's path," he notes, "from the *Docta ignorantia* to the *Venatio sapientiae*, over almost a quarter of a century, is not consistent. It begins with a God Who, as *the* [absolute] maximum [*der Grösste*], could produce likewise only a work of His order of magnitude, *the* [restricted] maximum [*das Grösste*]. This God is replaced by a God of

complicated formulas, for Whom the world that He was actually to create had no precedence over any other entirely heterogeneous—to us, admittedly, inconceivable—possible world contents.” In this passage (p. 520) Blumenberg is comparing *De Docta Ignorantia* III, 3 (201:10)<sup>357</sup> with *De Venatione Sapientiae* 27. But, contrary to what he contends, there is no inconsistency between these two passages. In *De Venatione Sapientiae* Nicholas speaks of God as free to create or not to create one world or another in accordance with His will. This point is not at all incompatible with anything propounded in *De Docta Ignorantia*, where God’s creating act is also regarded as free. In *De Docta Ignorantia* II, 4 (116:11) Nicholas remarks that “all things sprang into existence from God’s design”—a statement which implies, by virtue of the word “design” (“*intentio*”), the freedom of the creative act. This freedom is also implied by the statement in *De Docta Ignorantia* I, 22 (69:9) that God “was able to foresee even the opposite of that which He did foresee.” This point is related to the point made in *De Possest* 8:14-15: “God’s creative power is not exhausted in His creation.” In *De Docta Ignorantia* II, 1 (96:18-21) Nicholas writes: “There is not positable anything which would limit the Divine Power. Therefore, the Divine Power can posit a greater and a lesser than any given thing, unless this given thing is also the Absolute Maximum . . . .”<sup>358</sup> Blumenberg seems to labor under the misimpression that according to *De Docta Ignorantia* there is only one unique maximal universe that God could have created if He was to create a maximal universe; and this misimpression seems to be connected with his misconception about Nicholas’s notion of “infinite universe.” At any rate, Nicholas maintains in *De Docta Ignorantia* that God created the present universe to be maximal in the sense that it is as great as it can be, in relation to its created possibilities; but God could have created another maximal universe with even greater possibilities.<sup>359</sup>

6.6.4.3. Thirdly, in the passage under discussion—viz., p. 520 of Blumenberg’s book—Blumenberg alleges that according to *De Venatione Sapientiae* the world that God was actually to create “*had no precedence over any other entirely heterogeneous . . . possible world contents.*”<sup>360</sup> If Blumenberg is suggesting—as he seems to be—that according to *De Venatione Sapientiae* 27 God might have created a world that was not as great or as perfect as *it* could be, then this

suggestion need not be taken seriously. For *De Venatione Sapientiae* 27 does not so much as hint at this view. Nicholas says only that ontologically prior to anything's having been created, one thing was as creatable as another and that God, in creating, selected between alternative possible worlds. But from this statement it does not follow that God might possibly have chosen to create an imperfect world—that perfect worlds did not take precedence over imperfect worlds. Blumenberg apparently believes that in *De Venatione Sapientiae* Nicholas returned to a view that he had held *prior to* his view in *De Docta Ignorantia*. That is, he apparently believes—though his own text is not fully clear here—that at the time of composing the sermon “*Dies Sanctificatus*” Nicholas held the view that creation was a free choice of the Divine Will between alternative possible worlds. This is the view that Nicholas is said by Blumenberg to have abandoned in *De Docta Ignorantia* and to have come back to in *De Venatione Sapientiae*: “The later Nicholas of Cusa *returns* to the intradivine volitional decision, which is indeed asserted to be rational but is not accessible as such, and which *ordains* this world like a *decree*.”<sup>361</sup> However, Blumenberg's interpretation is defeated by the fact that we find written in *De Docta Ignorantia* II, 13 (178):

Who would not admire this Artisan, who with regard to the spheres, the stars, and the regions of the stars used such skill that there is—though without complete precision—both a harmony of all things and a diversity of all things? [This Artisan] *considered in advance* the sizes, the placing, and the motion of the stars in the one world; and He *ordained* the distances of the stars in such way that unless each region were as it is, it could neither exist nor exist in such a place and with such an order—nor could the universe exist. Moreover, He *bestowed* on all stars a differing brightness, influence, shape, color, and heat . . . And He *established* the interrelationship of parts so proportionally that in each thing the motion of the parts is oriented toward the whole.<sup>362</sup>

There is no justification for Blumenberg's belief that in *De Docta Ignorantia* creation is not presented by Nicholas as an act of Divine Will.<sup>363</sup> Moreover, Blumenberg, in the revised German text of 1976, should no longer have held—if indeed this was his view—that the sermon “*Dies Sanctificatus*” was written before *De Docta Ignorantia*. For long before 1976 Rudolf Haubst established the correct date of this sermon as Christmas, 1440, a date subsequent to the completion of *De Docta Ignorantia*.

6.6.4.4. Finally, still with respect to p. 520, Blumenberg misleadingly insinuates that at one time or another, or in one place or another, Nicholas propounded his doctrine of *coincidentia oppositorum* "only to bring about mystical obscurification." To be sure, Nicholas's doctrine is related to his teachings about *visio dei*. But only someone who did not discern, within the Cusan system, the utterly pivotal position of the doctrine of coincidence could suppose that it was ever envisaged by Nicholas as serving only to bring about mystical obscurification.

6.6.5. Many of Blumenberg's statements are either overstatements or half-truths. A prime example of a half-truth is found on p. 513:

The ancient/medieval world picture was geocentric in not only its static but also its dynamic structure. The earth not only 'stood' in the center but it was also the ultimate pole of reference of all cosmic influences, which always passed from 'above' to 'below.' The God of High Scholasticism still made use, for the exercise of His world regime, of mediating agencies, secondary causalities, and thus adhered to the very schema on which the continuing acceptance of astrological ideas also depended. *The Cusan breaks with this schema*; the heavenly powers no longer flow only in one direction, from above to below, from the sublime spheres to the purely receptive and thus all too 'earthly' earth. That old idea now proves to be dependent on the cosmological illusion of the central position of the earth, toward which the directions of influence of the universe appear to converge . . . . The ancient and medieval *hierarchical cosmos has lost its reality*, and indeed precisely because its mediating function between God and man has been eliminated.<sup>364</sup>

Blumenberg creates the false impression that Nicholas breaks with the picture of a universe that is hierarchically arranged and that has mediating features, secondary causes, astrological ideas. But when we turn to *De Docta Ignorantia*, and even to later works, we find Nicholas's thought allowing for the very items that Blumenberg claims to have been rejected. In *De Docta Ignorantia* II, 12 (172:13), for example, Nicholas speaks of causal relations (*proportiones influentiales*) between all the individual stars; and what are these causal relations if not secondary causes? Likewise, his conception of the universe is in many respects hierarchical. This fact is evident from *De Docta Ignorantia* III, 1 (184-188), where he makes statements such as the following: "Among genera, which contract the one universe, there is such a union of a lower [genus] and a higher [genus] that the two coincide in a third [genus] in between. And among the different spe-



cies there is such an order of combination that the highest species of the one genus coincides with the lowest [species] of the immediately higher [genus], so that there is one continuous and perfect universe."<sup>365</sup> And he adds: "It is evident that species are like a number series which progresses sequentially and which, necessarily, is finite, so that there is order, harmony, and proportion in diversity . . . ."<sup>366</sup> Similarly, in *De Docta Ignorantia* III, 3 he speaks of higher and lower natures—the human order being created lower than the angelic order.<sup>367</sup> In *De Docta Ignorantia* II, 12 (172:6-7) he refers to "the one universal world" which is contracted "in terms of its own four-fold descending progression . . . ." Even in *De Coniecturis* he retains a *hierarchical* conception of the four onenesses (God, intellect, soul, the corporeal).<sup>368</sup> Likewise, in *De Visione Dei* 24 he subscribes to a hierarchy of powers: Divine, intellectual, rational, imaginative, sensitive, vegetative. And he posits movers for the heavenly orbits. And when stating in *De Docta Ignorantia* II, 12 that the inhabitants of other stars bear no comparative relationship to the inhabitants of the earth, he adds the qualifier: this is true "even if, with respect to the goal of the universe, that entire region bears to this entire region a certain comparative relationship which is hidden to us—so that in this way the inhabitants of this earth or region bear, through the medium of the whole region, a certain mutual relationship to those other inhabitants."<sup>369</sup> Not only does Nicholas retain a medieval conception of the relation of whole to parts, he also retains, as was already briefly noted, a medieval conception of gradation: "When I say 'God exists,' this sentence proceeds by means of a certain motion but in such an order that I first articulate the letters, then the syllables, then the words, and then, last of all, the sentence—although the sense of hearing does not discern this order by stages. In like manner, motion descends by stages from the universal [*universum*] unto the particular, where it is contracted by the temporal or natural order. But this motion, or spirit, descends from the Divine Spirit, which moves all things by this motion."<sup>370</sup> Furthermore, Nicholas continues to conceive created things in terms of actuality and potentiality,<sup>371</sup> form and matter,<sup>372</sup> substance and accident.<sup>373</sup> Even the alleged inhabitants of the sun and the moon and the known inhabitants of the earth are described in terms of actuality and potentiality.<sup>374</sup> And even the Aristotelian medieval belief that heavy things

move "downward" toward the center and light things "upward" away from the center is not excluded from Nicholas's system.<sup>375</sup> Finally, Nicholas leaves open the possibility of astrology when he introduces the speculation that on earth there are as many species of things as there are stars and that "the earth contracts to distinct species the influence of all the stars . . . ."<sup>376</sup> Instead of condemning the astrologers in *De Possest* 23, he makes a special point of alluding to their knowledge.

So Blumenberg speaks a half-truth when he asserts flatly that Nicholas breaks with the Scholastic conception of the universe and that, for Nicholas, the ancient and medieval hierarchical cosmos has lost its reality. Ironically, Blumenberg supports these half-truths by appealing to still other half-truths—and even to falsehoods. Thus, on p. 514 he alludes to "the transfer of the mystical formula . . . of the intelligible sphere, whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere, from the Divinity (for whose mystical representation it had originally been invented) to the universe . . . ." But contrary to Blumenberg's comment, this formula is *not* transferred *from* the Divinity *to* the universe (whether in *De Docta Ignorantia* II, 12 or elsewhere in the Cusanus corpus). For to the universe Nicholas applies not the formula "the intelligible sphere, whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere" but rather the formula 'God, who is everywhere and nowhere, is the circumference and the center of the world, so that the world has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere, so to speak.'<sup>377</sup> This difference is critical, since it evidences that Nicholas at no point transfers the formula *away from the Divinity*, because the formula that is applied to the universe includes, in an essential way, reference to the Divinity.

A second example of a half-truth by Blumenberg is displayed on p. 516, where we read:

In general the Cusan has an aversion to teleological interpretations in his cosmology; teleology appears to him as compensation for a deficiency in creatures such that the latter are supposed to find in the preparation of their world circumstances what is denied to their self-realization . . . . The stars shine in order not<sup>378</sup> to give light to man or to other beings but rather to fulfill their own nature. Light shines by virtue of its nature—that its light<sup>379</sup> also allows one to see is not its primary definition but rather a secondary process of putting it to work—a process that is based on the activity of the seer, that is, on what he makes of the world.

Blumenberg is here misinterpreting *De Docta Ignorantia* II, 12 (166), which does *not* manifest on Nicholas's part an aversion to teleological interpretations in his cosmology. A foot exists, says Nicholas, for walking; an eye exists for seeing. "A similar thing," he continues, "holds true regarding the parts of the world." A star exists in order to gleam with a certain degree of brightness, to be moved in a certain orbit, and to produce its own degree of heat. Moreover, each thing desires to conserve its own existence. Here Nicholas's explanation is *already* teleological. It becomes more so when he adds that God created each thing "in such way that when each thing desires to conserve its own existence as a divine work, it conserves it in communion with others."<sup>380</sup> So although the foot exists for walking, it serves the other parts of the body; for God has coordinated each part of the body in such way that in fulfilling its own nature it conduces to the functioning of the entire bodily system. A similar fact holds true, teaches Nicholas, concerning the earth and the other planets within the "region" of the earth;<sup>381</sup> "the mutual relationship of influence is such that one influence cannot exist without the other."<sup>382</sup> And with regard to the different regions God "ordained the distances of the stars in such way that unless each region were as it is, it could neither exist nor exist in such a place and with such an order—nor could the universe exist."<sup>383</sup> Moreover, since "the Perfect God created all things for Himself,"<sup>384</sup> "all existing things endeavor, as best they can, to participate in His 'brightness and blazing splendor,' so to speak,"<sup>385</sup> so that "He alone is sought in all things."<sup>386</sup> Nicholas speaks, too, of the "goal of the universe."<sup>387</sup> Thus, far from having an aversion to teleological interpretations within his cosmology, he himself promotes these interpretations. Blumenberg remarks that, according to Nicholas, "light shines by virtue of its nature" and that light's also allowing someone to see "is not its primary definition but rather a secondary process of putting it to work." Blumenberg fails to realize that a cosmology or a philosophy of nature can be teleological even when denying that the primary definition of "light" is in terms of enabling perceivers to see. Such a philosophy need only admit that one of the purposes of the *source* of light is to furnish light and that within the total system of things light aids the proper functioning of some other part or parts.

#### 6.6.6. Nicholas's conception of *providentia* (foresight, providence)

is also misinterpreted by Blumenberg: "If God is the enfolding of everything—even, then, of contradictories—nothing remains that could escape His foresight (*Vorsehung*). This universality can be neither increased nor decreased—not even had it foreseen something other than, in fact, it did foresee or will foresee, and not even though it did foresee much that it did not need to foresee."<sup>388</sup> Herefrom, together with an accompanying example, Blumenberg concludes: "Thus, already in Cusa's early work *providentia* is related to the concept of possibility, so that it [i.e., God's foresight] would remain unchanged even if something were to occur that in fact will not occur. But this means that the individual cannot find in the concept of *providentia* a justification of his existence."<sup>389</sup> Blumenberg's premise is partially inaccurate as an interpretation of *De Docta Ignorantia* I, 22; and his conclusion is wholly a non sequitur. In the premise, the expression "though it did foresee much that it did not need to foresee"<sup>390</sup> is objectionable. Nicholas's Latin reads: " . . . [*quamvis deus*] *multa etiam providit, quae potuit non providere* . . . "<sup>391</sup> And this clause in no way contains the idea that God foresaw much that He *did not need to foresee*. Instead, it indicates that God foresaw many things which He was *able not to foresee*. This difference is pivotal to Nicholas's line of reasoning, which becomes incoherent on Blumenberg's construal.

Little wonder, then, that Blumenberg's conclusion is a non sequitur. But what, exactly, are we to make of his conclusion?—a conclusion that is as bizarre as it is illogical: "This means that the individual cannot find in the concept of *providentia* [foresight, providence] a justification of his existence." First of all, let us realize that no one at all—under any conceivable circumstances—could ever find in the *concept* of divine foresight a *justification* of his existence. For concepts cannot intelligibly be said to justify anyone's existence. Someone's discovery, or formulation, of an important concept, formula, model, schema, or logical connection might intelligibly be said to provide—in some sense of "justifying"—a justifying ground for that person's life. So too might his belief in the truth of the applicability of some concept. But what sense would it make to say, flatly, that some person's life is justified by a concept? Not in the *concept of divine foresight* but rather in the *reality of divine foresight* might someone find a transcendent meaning or a theological justification of his life.

Accordingly, let us assume that this latter is the expression that Blumenberg really meant to employ. Even so, his conclusion remains a non sequitur that results from his failure to recognize a central historical fact: viz., that according to Nicholas of Cusa's belief—even at the time he wrote *De Docta Ignorantia*—God's foreknowledge is logically dependent upon His foreordination.<sup>392</sup> Thus, when Nicholas says that "although God could have foreseen many things which He did not foresee and will not foresee and although He foresaw many things which He was able not to foresee, nevertheless nothing can be added to or subtracted from divine foresight,"<sup>393</sup> he implies that God could have ordained many things which He does not ordain and that, likewise, He ordains many things which He was able not to ordain. And if this implicatum is true, then someone might well find, in the reality that accords with this truth, a theological justification of his human condition. For he would then be entitled to believe that God ordained not out of necessity but in accordance with perfect wisdom (*sapientia* and *providentia* being conceptually distinguishable).

6.7. *Nicholas's Anthropology.* 6.7.1. Just as Blumenberg's documentation is imprecise, as is also his discussion of Nicholas's cosmology, so too is his representation of Nicholas's philosophical anthropology. Many of his claims are vague and unsupported—as if the mere assertion of them should suffice:

From the urgency of the foregoing starting point one can develop Cusa's intellectual accomplishment: (1) his maintenance, indeed intensification, of the factor of divine transcendence, but at the same time the advancement both of man and the cosmos toward the qualities of this transcendence; (2) his holding fast to the triumph over Aristotelian epistemology with its idea of a conceptuality 'taken from' the objects themselves (that is, his holding fast to the critical achievements of nominalism as he had probably become acquainted with them in the school of the Brethren of the Common Life at Deventer), but at the same time his conducting of this new theory-of-concepts away from functioning merely as an economical expedient unto its becoming the acknowledgement of the authentic and specific dignity of human systematic comprehension of reality.<sup>394</sup>

Almost everything about this passage is problematical. The opening point tacitly attributes to Nicholas's thought an antinomy: Nicholas is said to attempt, on the one hand, to intensify the factor of divine transcendence and, on the other, to formulate a picture of man and the cosmos that advances them toward the qualities (*Qualitäten*) of

this transcendence. Now, insofar as God is transcendent He has no *qualities* (both according to Nicholas of Cusa and in accordance with the ordinary theological understanding of the concept *divine transcendence*).<sup>395</sup> Hence, if the factor of transcendence is intensified, then the notion of divine qualities ("the qualities of this transcendence") becomes so diminished that man cannot at all be understood to be advanced toward any such qualities. By contrast, if human beings and the cosmos *are* intelligibly said to be advanced "toward the qualities of this transcendence," then the notion of transcendence will have to be so reduced that the entire program of *docta ignorantia*—and with it the doctrine of divine simplicity—will collapse. Since Nicholas himself, however, nowhere entertains either the concept or the expression *the qualities of this transcendence*, it is difficult to see how he could be developing a viewpoint in which man and the cosmos are "advanced" toward such qualities.

6.7.2. The foregoing passage also represents Nicholas as "holding fast to the critical achievements of nominalism," even though Blumenberg never makes an attempt to articulate just what these achievements are and though his statement seems inconsistent with his equally vague claim on p. 523 that Nicholas is fundamentally a Scholastic realist regarding universals. Rather than facing up to his own inconsistency of exposition, Blumenberg prefers to avoid serious analysis of Nicholas's epistemology by levelling a sweeping indictment against it: "I will not make what I believe would have to be a futile attempt at a unitary interpretation of the Cusan's theory of knowledge. Here in particular the inner consistency of his philosophical accomplishment is doubtful. The reason for this can be specified: It lies, again, in the inability to deal with or successfully to evade the consequences of nominalism."<sup>396</sup> Yet, Blumenberg nowhere manages to show any such inconsistency on Nicholas's part, and thus his own evasion of a careful exposition of Nicholas's epistemology remains without any apparent foundation. By making such sweeping claims as that Nicholas holds fast to the triumph over Aristotelian epistemology, Blumenberg places himself under a special obligation to provide this foundation. However, his attitude is so dismissive that he does not even bother to mention—let alone discuss—Nicholas's acceptance of the Aristotelian-Thomistic doctrine that "there cannot

be in the intellect anything which is such that it was not first in the senses."<sup>397</sup>

Moreover, certain passages mentioned by Blumenberg are expounded misleadingly. His discussion of Nicholas's illustration of the mapmaker<sup>398</sup> furnishes a prime instance. Nicholas uses the illustration as a means for directing our contemplation unto the Maker of ourselves and our world. Within ourselves, he says, the intellect resembles a mapmaker who resides within an enclosed city that has five gates, analogous to the five senses. Through these gates messengers are received from all parts of the sensible world, bringing with them reports, or sensations. Those messengers who bring news regarding light and color must enter through the gate of sight; those who bring news of sounds and voices must enter through the gate of hearing; and so on. The cosmographer takes cognizance of these reports. And he strives to keep all five gates open, so that he may continually receive reports from new messengers and thus make for himself a description-of-the-sensible-world that is progressively more accurate. Had one of these gates always remained shut—e.g., the gate of sight—the cosmographer would have had no information about the sun or the stars or about any object in the sensible world insofar as that object is visible. At length, having made an overall determination of the sensible world, beyond the domain of the gates, he reduces it to a well-ordered and proportionally measured map. Thereafter, he sends away the messengers and closes the gates. And he transfers his inner gaze to the Creator of the sensible world—a Creator who is none of all the things of which he has learned through the messengers, but who is rather the Cause of all these things. And he reflects upon how it is that, in an antecedent way, the Creator bears to the whole world a relationship that is like his own relationship to his map. And just as truth about the sensible world shines forth in his map, so truth about the Maker of the whole world shines forth in himself qua mapmaker.

Nicholas's purpose in proposing the foregoing illustration is to indicate how we may formulate, if only symbolically,<sup>399</sup> an acceptable concept of God as Creator. The illustration does not aim at addressing the issue of how exactly the map is related to the sensible world. It does not seek to illuminate the dispute between epistemological realists and epistemological idealists or conventionalists. In an implicit

manner, however, the illustration does show that Nicholas regards the map as a true representation of the sensible world—a true representation that can in principle always be made progressively more accurate.<sup>400</sup> The cosmographer, in reducing to a map the determinations-of-the-sensible-world that he has attained through the reports of the messengers, preserves both the order of the sensible world and, proportionally, the distances between objects. The cosmographer shuts the gates of the senses only after gathering information and making an accurate—though not perfectly accurate—map. He wants the map in order not to forget the determinations that he has been making; and he shuts the gates in order to be able to contemplate in quietude the Cause of the sensible world. Nicholas implies that the cosmographer can at any time thereafter reopen the gates, receive more messengers, and check the accuracy of his map.

Blumenberg seems to suppose—though his discussion is unduly vague—that the illustration is a step in Nicholas's path toward over-coming Aristotelian epistemology, for he writes:

The world map which the cosmographer makes is, for Cusanus, an especially typical illustration: the map does indeed have a likeness to the world that is represented, but it is anything other than a [mere] combination of the images of the things it represents. It is a reconstruction; and it resembles a conjecture in the following way: though it is a "participation" insofar as it represents, it is nonetheless a participation in otherness. The cosmographer gives a representation of the entire sensibly apprehensible world. He does so, to be sure, by working upon, ordering, and reducing to a common scale the data and information that are brought to him from without—but nonetheless by remaining at home, closing the doors, and turning his gaze inward toward the World Ground which is present within him and which first provides him with the unifying principle for all the facts brought in from without.<sup>401</sup>

Here Blumenberg's emphasis upon reconstruction (*Nachkonstruktion*), upon conjecture, upon the cosmographer's staying within the city, closing the gates, turning inward to find the unifying principle of the data from without—these emphases, as presented by Blumenberg, suggest that Nicholas is here "holding fast to the critical achievements of nominalism."<sup>402</sup> If this is what Blumenberg is aiming to say, then he is surely mistaken. For, as we have seen, in the illustration Nicholas indicates that (1) the cosmographer receives reports that enable him to make a true—but not perfectly true—description of the world and that (2) the cosmographer reduces this description to a



rightly ordered and proportionally measured map ("*in mappam redigit bene ordinatam et proportionabiliter mensuratam . . .*"). Blumenberg calls attention to the mapmaker's not leaving the city and not keeping the gates open. But who would expect the mapmaker to leave the city?—something comparable to obtaining a direct, intuitive (i.e., non-sensible) vision of the world. Such a summons to cognize the world directly and independently of the five senses was never a part of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century epistemological realist's platform. Moreover, Blumenberg, fails to mention that (1) the gates are closed only *after* the map has been made and that (2) the Creator who is thereafter contemplatively sought is not sought in order to acquire some further knowledge about things in the sensible world, nor even in order to unify the knowledge-of-the-world that has already been attained.

6.7.3. Blumenberg's use of the word "conjecture" as it relates to Nicholas needs the following kind of clarification:

We generally contrast what is conjectured with what is known. And Nicholas sometimes does so too—but not routinely. In *De coniecturis* a "conjecture" is construed as a judgment (about reality) which does not attain unto maximal precision. Since only God, who is *mens infinita*, has absolutely precise knowledge, all human knowledge is said to be a mode of "conjecture." But this statement does not mean that "*coniectura*" is not also oftentimes a mode of knowledge, in our sense of "knowledge." Accordingly, Nicholas regards a *coniectura* as participating in the truth, as being partly (but never precisely) true [*De coniecturis* I, 11 (57:10-11)]. This fact explains why he can use the expression "*coniecturalis cognitio*" ("conjectural knowledge") at the beginning of *De coniecturis* II, 17 and why in II, 16 (157) he can indicate that, with the cooperation of the intellect, the sense of sight attains unto what is visible (e.g., a human passer-by). Again and again, as in II, 15 (148), he makes clear that what cannot be attained by us except *in coniectura* is the *precise truth* (*praecisio veritatis*).<sup>403</sup>

Such a clarification is never forthcoming in Blumenberg's book. Indeed, from other mistakes that Blumenberg makes, we may infer that he does not really understand Nicholas's notion of *coniectura*. For if he did, he would not interpret Nicholas's doctrine of *image* along the following lines: "The truth is by no means present in the image unless the image is always immediately suspended as such. For while each image does represent the truth, at the same time, as an image, it has already fallen away and is hopelessly distant from it."<sup>404</sup>

Blumenberg misreads *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*, which he cites in support of his assertion. For there is nothing in *Apologia* 11—or even in *Apologia* 30—that warrants the foregoing interpretation. In these passages, together with the parts of *De Docta Ignorantia* to which they allude, Nicholas teaches (1) that “God shines forth in creatures as the truth [i.e., as an original, or an exemplar,] shines forth in an image”;<sup>405</sup> (2) that “every image, in that it is an image, falls short of the truth of its exemplar,”<sup>406</sup> so that a potentially infinite number of ever-closer approximations of image to exemplar remain;<sup>407</sup> (3) that, thus, “in an image the truth cannot at all be seen as it is [in itself]”;<sup>408</sup> (4) that, nonetheless, some degree of truth is seen in the image, insofar as the image is an image of an exemplar [i.e., of a real object],<sup>409</sup> so that through the image the exemplar is seen; (5) that in the case of God what is seen from the image, or creature, is that God, the Creator, is unknowable.<sup>410</sup> Blumenberg, however, insinuates that, according to *De Docta Ignorantia* and the *Apologia*, the relationship of *all* exemplifying images to their respective exemplar is such that the exemplar is incomprehensible on the basis of the image. This insinuation is present in the tendentiously elided footnote<sup>411</sup> with which he supports his claim on pp. 498–499. And it is even more strongly present in his words “hopelessly distant” (“*hoffnungslos entfernt*”): an image—any image—is alleged to be hopelessly distant from its truth.

In fact, Blumenberg does not understand even the broad outlines of Nicholas’s program of learned ignorance. Otherwise, he would never assert, on p. 487: “He [viz., Nicholas] opposes to *and* superimposes upon the plunge into the all-extinguishing obscurity of the mystical experience of God the ‘method’ of *docta ignorantia* . . .” If *opposition* and *superimposition* were not incompatible notions, so that Blumenberg’s assertion were not unintelligible, then the assertion would be false. For Nicholas nowhere *opposes* learned ignorance and mystical experience but instead interrelates them, as has already been shown.<sup>412</sup>

6.7.4. We may return now to the quotation with which this present subsection (viz., 6.7) on anthropology began—viz., the passage (from pp. 35–36 of the German edition) out of which arose the topic of nominalism. At the end of this passage Blumenberg repeats, uncritically, the legend about Nicholas’s having been a schoolboy amongst

the Brothers of the Common Life at Deventer, in Holland.<sup>413</sup> Then he goes on to remark: Nicholas leads the nominalistic theory of concepts “away from functioning merely as an economical expedient [*ökonomische Notlösung*] unto its becoming the acknowledgement of the authentic and specific dignity of human systematic comprehension of reality.” But to regard fourteenth-century nominalistic concept theory as a *Notlösung* is to misconceive the intellectual situation—and, therefore, to misconceive the *Fragestellung*—that occasioned the development of nominalism. And, in any event, since Nicholas is not a nominalist—either in *De Docta Ignorantia*, *De Coniecturis*, *De Mente*, the *Compendium*,<sup>414</sup> or anywhere else—he cannot rightly be said to conduct this “new theory-of-concepts” anywhere.

6.7.5. In interpreting Nicholas's conception of faith Blumenberg fares no better than in interpreting other of his doctrines.

6.7.5.1. Oftentimes, he reads Nicholas's texts only cursorily, analyzing them only superficially as he rushes headlong toward making some sweeping claim or other. This indictment holds true regarding the following passage:

The Cusan presses the functionalization of faith a step further in the treatise *De genesi* [*On Genesis*].<sup>415</sup> He recommends that one should accept the declarations of *theological authority as though they were made known by divine revelation*, and only then should one attempt to grasp intellectually what one has at first assumed. He explicitly grounds this recommendation on his own experience. Here faith has drawn quite near to conjecture. They have in common the hypothetical function that has to prove itself by experience.<sup>416</sup>

This passage is a *Fehldeutung*, because in *De Genesi* 5 (175:7-12)—the Cusan text to which Blumenberg refers—Nicholas is not speaking of *theological* authority; nor is he speaking of the declarations of theological authority *as though* they were made known by divine revelation. Rather, he is dealing with *Biblical* authority and with declarations which *are*, on his view, divine revelation. For what is under discussion is the interpretation of Psalms 32:6 (33:6). And the general context deals with the issue of interpreting correctly the book of Genesis and the words of Moses. Nicholas would not have the same opinion about ecclesiastical authority or about theological authority, so-called. Certainly he does not hold that the theological authority of someone such as St. Augustine is equal to the authority of Scripture: indeed, Augustine's opinions need not be received on the basis of faith.

But in Blumenberg's exegesis there is a second error. "Here," he says, "faith has drawn quite near to conjecture. They have in common the hypothetical function that has to prove itself by experience." But in *De Genesi* 5 (175:7-12)—the referent of "here"—Nicholas is making no claim about *proving by experience*. He is dealing with the meaning of Psalms 32:6 (33:6): "By the word of the Lord the heavens were established; and all the power of them by the spirit of his mouth . . . ." <sup>417</sup> And is there anything that is a less likely candidate for proof by experience than is the proposition "By the word of the Lord the heavens were established . . . ." Blumenberg's exegesis of Nicholas's text is altogether undisciplined. Let us concede that in Nicholas's works there *are* places—not mentioned by Blumenberg—where Nicholas likens faith to conjecture, in some sense of "conjecture," and to hypothesis, in some sense of "hypothesis." If an interpreter is to avoid exegetical falsity, he must take the trouble to place proper restrictions upon the use of the words "conjecture" and "hypothesis"; for faith, as depicted by Nicholas, is not like speculative conjecture or like scientific hypothesis. In *De Visione Dei* 21 Nicholas declares: "If anyone believes and accepts, he will most truly find that You descended from Heaven and that You alone are the Teacher of truth." <sup>418</sup> Here he *does* consider faith to carry with it a promissory note about future findings. But faith is not here understood as being tested—in the manner in which a scientific hypothesis is tested—so that it may be either *confirmed or disconfirmed*. 'Most truly finding that the Son of God descended from Heaven' is only in a metaphorical sense like finding a treasure. <sup>419</sup>

In *De Visione Dei* Nicholas does not envision the possibility of faith's being disconfirmed. His instructions are not: 'Do this, viz., believe, and such and such can be expected to occur; however, if it does not occur, then this nonoccurrence will count against the truth of the proposition that is, or was, believed.' The statement from *De Visione Dei* 21 is not intended to make a straightforward empirical claim. For the kind of finding that Nicholas has in mind is a finding that can take place only if preceded by devout faith, which dare not be equated with hypothesizing belief. By comparison, the Biblical statement "And we know that to them that love God all things work together unto good" <sup>420</sup> is not a proposition whose putative truth is treated by St. Paul as reformulable into an hypothesis that is empiri-

cally confirmable or disconfirmable in the course of this lifetime. Rather, it expresses St. Paul's hope and conviction; moreover, it contains an implicit recommendation to the believer to view his suffering as serving some good end—good even for himself, the sufferer. Similarly, Nicholas's statement about finding that the Son of God descended from Heaven expresses his hope and conviction; and it contains an implicit recommendation that accords with the teaching of Jesus: "Seek, and you shall find."<sup>421</sup> Nicholas would not suppose that anyone who does not "find" thereby casts doubt upon the "validity" of the injunction; instead, he would regard such a person as not seeking with all his heart.<sup>422</sup>

In *De Docta Ignorantia* III, 11 (244:3-9) Nicholas remarks, from his standpoint within Christianity: "All our forefathers unanimously maintain that faith is the beginning of understanding. For in every branch of study certain things are presupposed as first principles. They are grasped by faith alone, and from them is elicited an understanding of the matters to be treated. For everyone who wills to ascend to learning must believe those things without which he cannot ascend. For Isaiah says 'Unless you believe, you will not understand.' " Perhaps this is the passage that Blumenberg has in mind when he observes that, for Nicholas, *fides* and *coniectura* are functionally equivalent in that "they provide reason with the presuppositions it needs in order to arrive at conclusions within the total system."<sup>423</sup> At least, this passage will help to illuminate Blumenberg's interpretation. But it must be brought into relationship with other texts which show that *religious* faith is depicted differently from the foregoing kind of faith. Indeed, from the viewpoint of Christianity religious faith is the gift of God, says Nicholas.<sup>424</sup> It is faith-in-Christ, faith in-formed by love, faith that makes a man Christlike, faith that has the power to move mountains, faith that wills to be elevated to a level of indubitable certainty. Such faith is not functionally equivalent to *coniectura*; consequently, Blumenberg has once again furnished us with only a vague half-truth.

6.7.5.2. But let us turn to a second instance of misinterpreting what Nicholas says about faith. "Now one sees," notes Blumenberg, "as soon as one investigates the Cusan's descriptions of the act of faith, that Wenck's opposition to the effacement of the distinction between the status of knowledge in this world and in the next was

not groundless. The antithesis of earthly faith to the *visio* [vision] in the world to come disappears when faith itself is defined as *coincidentia visibilis et invisibilis* [coincidence of the visible and the invisible] and the intellect takes the content of revelation in *certitudine, ac si vidisset* [for certainty, as though it had seen it].<sup>425</sup> But, once again, almost everything about this interpretation is erroneous. First of all, Wenck's opposition is groundless, because Nicholas does not so much as *tend toward* effacing the distinction between the status of understanding (*intellectus, Erkenntnis*) in this world and in the next.<sup>426</sup> Secondly, Nicholas does not cause to disappear the opposition between present faith and future vision.<sup>427</sup> Thirdly, he does not *define* faith as *coincidentia visibilis et invisibilis*; and, fourthly, the intellect does not *unqualifiedly* take the content of revelation for a certainty. These third and fourth assertions by Blumenberg result from his faulty exegesis of Nicholas's sermon "*Sic currite ut comprahendatis*."<sup>428</sup> What Nicholas says in the relevant section of this sermon is the following:

Therefore, the ability to believe is the greatest power of our soul. It exceeds all intellectual power; for it pertains to the things which the soul wills, since it proceeds from freedom of will. For the rational soul can believe or not believe depending upon whether it wills [to believe] or does not will [to believe]; and this is the greatest gift of God. Similarly, the spirit, or free will, through the faith which it adopts, governs the intellect and in-forms it with its own form. For it commands the intellect. And certain individuals were accustomed to say that in the speculative intellect faith is under the command of the will, because the will does not allow the intellect to discern unless the intellect is habituated by faith. But the intellect readily receives the faith which it does not understand—[receives it] when the will announces to it, through faith, the items-to-be-believed which we hear; for they have been revealed to us by the Son of God, i.e., through the Word of God [i.e., through Scripture]. For the will is the soul's "hearing," as it were; and the intellect is its "sight," so to speak. And so, the things which a soul that is zealous for the good has heard, it announces to the intellect, so that the intellect may know itself. For the things which the will reports are such that they cannot be seen. The intellect believes that true things have been reported to it, and it accepts them as if they were seen—i.e., [it accepts them] in certitude, as if it had seen. Thus, faith, as it concerns the intellect, is present in a coincidence of the visible and the invisible.

Obviously, Nicholas is not here *defining* the concept of faith, and a fortiori he is not defining it as *coincidentia visibilis et invisibilis*.

Moreover, the *visibilis* that he alludes to has been clearly stated to be *as if visible*. Hence, the coincidence here posited does not destroy, but rather reinforces, the distinction between earthly faith and future vision. Blumenberg should emphasize that the "certitude of faith" is significantly different from theoretical certitude. Instead, he wrongly emphasizes the opposite: "This mediation between faith and knowledge [*Wissen*] seems at first to tend, entirely in the framework of the medieval, toward positing faith as absolute; but faith can now equally well stand in the service of knowledge [*Wissen*], in that it postulates freedom for playing through new possibilities of knowledge [*Erkenntnis*]." <sup>429</sup> Yet, in the passage from the sermon Nicholas is not making faith stand in the service of *Wissen*; nor is he mediating *Glaube* and *Wissen*. Since the truths of faith are accepted by the believer's intellect as if they were seen, i.e., as if they were known, it follows that they are not known in any ordinary sense of "known" and do not have the kind of certainty that accompanies sight. Accordingly, in *De Docta Ignorantia* III, 11 Nicholas has no hesitancy about writing: "But soundest faith-in-Christ, made steadfastly firm in simplicity, can, in accordance with previously given instruction in ignorance, be increased and unfolded in ascending degrees. For although hidden from the wise, the very great and very deep mysteries of God are revealed, through faith in Jesus, to the small and humble inhabitants of the world. For Jesus is the one in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden, and without Him no one can do anything . . . . Since God is not knowable in this world (where by reason and by opinion or by doctrine we are led, with symbols, through the more known to the unknown), *He is apprehended only where persuasive considerations cease and faith appears*." <sup>430</sup>

In the sermon "*Sic currite ut compraehendatis*" Nicholas is dealing not with faith in Christ (viz., saving faith) but with faith (i.e., propositional faith) by which a mortal man believes that he can attain unto immortality. Nevertheless, even in this regard Nicholas affirms that faith must vanquish reason, just as Abraham's faith vanquished reason when Abraham believed that which reason judged to be impossible—viz., that he would become the father of many nations. By comparison, since we have no experience of immortality, says Nicholas, and since reason even opposes belief in immortality, a man who accepts this doctrine on the basis of faith in the Word of God must triumph

over reason. So Nicholas's view of the relationship between faith and reason—as this view is presented in the sermon—does not support Blumenberg's assertion that here there is a mediation (*Vermittlung*) between faith and knowledge (*Wissen*) or that faith can now equally well stand *im Dienste des Wissens*, i.e., in the service of knowledge.

6.7.5.3. Instead of pointing out the complexity of Nicholas's notion (or notions) of faith, Blumenberg selects a passage here and there and, without examining its fuller context, interprets it to fit his preconceptions and earlier misconceptions. In the present instance his misfocusing of Nicholas's notion of faith is influenced by his misconception regarding *docta ignorantia*, wherein he sees signs of an ambivalence, on Nicholas's part, between "skeptical resignation and encouragement of theory . . . ." <sup>431</sup> Nonetheless, as described by Nicholas himself the concept of *docta ignorantia* neither includes nor implies skeptical resignation. In the program of *docta ignorantia* the intellect neither aims at, nor terminates in, skeptical resignation; instead, it aims at *quies, pax, fruitio, gaudio*. <sup>432</sup> Even when in mystical ascent the intellect seeks to transcend itself, <sup>433</sup> it does not aim at skeptical resignation but at approaching nearer unto God. <sup>434</sup>

6.7.6. Just as Blumenberg does not understand Nicholas's conception of man's relationship to God through faith, so he does not understand Nicholas's conception of God. This fact is already evident from our previous examination of his statements about Nicholas's cosmology; but it surfaces again in his statements about Nicholas's philosophical anthropology. In particular, we may look at his treatment of Nicholas's illustration, in *De Visione Dei*, of the omni-voyant icon. According to Blumenberg "everyone who raises his gaze to the picture is regarded; but he is regarded only when and because he, for his part, looks toward the picture. The plurality and individuality of the viewers are not opposed to the identity of the picture; rather they are the partnership appropriate to it that for the first time unfolds its mysterious potentiality." <sup>435</sup> Yet, according to Nicholas, it is not the case that the icon's gaze—which symbolizes the divine gaze—looks upon the beholder "only when and because he, for his part, looks toward the picture." For Nicholas says unequivocally: "By means of this icon of You, O Lord, I see how favorably disposed You are to show Your face to all who seek You. For You never close Your eyes; You never turn [them] away. And although I turn away



from You when I completely turn to something else, You do not on this account change Your eyes or Your gaze."<sup>436</sup> Indeed, remarks Nicholas, "since Your seeing is Your being, I exist because You look upon me. And if You were to withdraw Your countenance from me, I would not at all continue to exist."<sup>437</sup> The angle of God's eye is an infinite sphere, asserts Nicholas, so that it sees all things at once,<sup>438</sup> so that it cannot fail to see every existent thing from every possible perspective. Blumenberg has failed to recognize Nicholas's dialectical approach.<sup>439</sup> For what Nicholas means is not that when I cease looking unto God (symbolized by the icon), God ceases looking upon me. He means that at this moment God ceases to look upon me *oculo gratiae*—with an eye of grace<sup>440</sup>—and now looks upon me with an eye of judgment.<sup>441</sup>

The second part of Blumenberg's assertion is equally wrong. For there is no *partnership* (*Partnerschaft*) between the icon and the beholder, i.e., between God and the beholder. Because Blumenberg thinks that God beholds me "only when and because" I look unto Him, he concludes that there is this partnership. His mistake about the former point leads to his mistake about the latter. But by means of the symbolism of the icon, Nicholas himself sees in his relationship to God not partnership but "companionship for my journey."<sup>442</sup> The term "partnership" might be unobjectionable were Blumenberg to understand it differently from the way he does—were he not to construe it in such way that the plurality and individuality of the beholders are the partnership that for the first time unfolds the icon's (and, thus, God's) mysterious potentiality.<sup>443</sup> Blumenberg's understanding, however, is foreign to Nicholas's teachings. For though Nicholas allows that created things are "unfolded" from God, he disallows that they serve in partnership with God to unfold His potentiality. And, in any event, the word "potentiality" (*Potentialität*) is misleading. For Nicholas considers God to be *Actualized-possibility*;<sup>444</sup> but the word "potentiality" suggests that not all the possibilities of His nature were always actualized.

6.7.7. Finally, Blumenberg distorts Nicholas's understanding of human freedom. To be sure, his discussion of this topic goes astray from the very outset, when he mistranslates *De Visione Dei* 7 (26:14 - 27:5) as:

When I thus come to rest in the silence of contemplation, You answer me, Lord, in my own breast, saying: "Be your own and I will be yours." You, Lord, have placed within my freedom my belonging to myself, if I but will to. If I have not become my own, then You too are not mine. With respect to the fact that You cannot be my possession unless I am my own, You coerce my freedom. With respect to the fact that You have placed this matter within my freedom, You do not coerce me but await my choosing to be my own.<sup>445</sup>

Now, in translating "*necessitates enim libertatem*" as "*Du n6tigst . . . meine Freiheit*" ("You coerce my freedom"), Blumenberg takes no account of the fact that "*necessitates*" is an imperfect subjunctive, not a present indicative. Moreover, in translating "*cum tu non possis esse meus nisi . . .*" as "*insofern . . . als du nicht mein Eigentum sein kannst, wenn . . . nicht . . .*," he misconstrues the meaning of "*cum*". In the end, he miscasts the argument that Nicholas is making in the passage.<sup>446</sup> And, in fact, his not having grasped the structure of the argument is what led to his mistranslating the passage. For "*necessitates enim libertatem*" can only be rightly translated if the argument in which it is embedded is rightly discerned.

How far Blumenberg remains from correctly comprehending the foregoing argument is displayed by the implications that he draws from it: "According to Cusanus God wills that man himself take over the Creator's original right-of-ownership to His creature and exercise it over himself. The theological concept of release [*Freisprechung*] liberates from guilt; the philosophical [concept of release liberates] from dependency on the ownership which God, as Author of man's existence, exercises over man."<sup>447</sup> This interpretation of Cusanus is nonsense.<sup>448</sup> Nowhere does Nicholas allow that man takes over from God the original right of ownership of himself. On the contrary, he maintains—in *De Visione Dei* itself—that "in the case of the intellectual nature Your Spirit has reserved exclusively for itself the governance and ordering."<sup>449</sup> Moreover, in *De Visione Dei* 7 he indicates clearly what he means by "Be your own." And it has nothing to do with taking over from the Creator the right of ownership to ourselves: "Yet, how will I be my own unless You, O Lord, teach me how? But You teach me that the senses should obey reason and that reason should govern."<sup>450</sup> Therefore, when the senses serve reason, I am my own. But reason has no one to direct it except You, O Lord,

who are the Word and the Rational Principle (*ratio*) of rational principles. Hence, I now see the following: if I hearken unto Your Word, which does not cease to speak within me and which continually shines forth in my reason, I shall be my own—free and not a servant of sin—and You will be mine and will grant me to see Your Face and then I shall be saved.”<sup>451</sup> Here Nicholas speaks again of God’s governance of man’s reason and of the need for man to be obedient to God’s Word. Nothing is said about man’s autonomous governing of himself or about his taking over rights from the Creator. Blumenberg recognizes Nicholas’s emphasis on obedience. But he distorts Nicholas’s view of the relationship between freedom and obedience when he writes: “Cusanus understood setting-free as an act-of-releasing-oneself which is likewise the epitome of obedience and which does not dissolve the ‘family bond’ but rather is grounded in God’s self-surrender to free-men.”<sup>452</sup> But in *De Visione Dei* Nicholas neither states nor implies that man liberates himself through some act of self-release, or *self-emancipation*. Rather, he maintains that man becomes free and no longer a servant of sin through faith and through *self-possession*—a notion which, for Nicholas, signifies not a surrendering of rights by God or an acquiring of them by man but the governance of man’s senses by his reason. And his reason is to be directed by God, whose Word is to shine forth in it.

6.8. *Nicholas’s Christology*. Various difficulties beset Blumenberg’s all-too-brief account of Nicholas’s Christology.

6.8.1. Blumenberg views Nicholas as caught in an antinomy which he, Nicholas, then resolves by appeal to the doctrine of Incarnation. The antinomy is allegedly the following: “on the one hand, the creation must possess the highest possible perfection but, on the other hand, must not reach the limit of what is possible in its Beginning [i.e., in its Creator].”<sup>453</sup> Now, this may be an antinomy that is present in some philosopher’s work, but it is not present in Nicholas’s work—certainly not in *De Docta Ignorantia* or in “*Dies Sanctificatus*.” For Nicholas never claims that creation must possess the highest possible perfection. (Indeed, only God is perfect in this sense.) His point in *De Docta Ignorantia* II, 2 (104) is that in the original creation every creature was as perfect as *it* could be,<sup>454</sup> even though its degree of perfection differed from the degree of perfection of every other created thing. Similarly, in *De Docta Ignorantia* II, 1

(97) he indicates that the totality of things—the universe—exists “in the best way in which the condition of its nature allows.”<sup>455</sup> God had the power to create a greater and a more perfect universe; yet, God created *this* universe, with its possibilities, to be as great and as perfect as it could be.<sup>456</sup> In this sense, it approaches as closely as possible to the maximum.<sup>457</sup> In *De Docta Ignorantia* III, 1 (185) Nicholas reaffirms that the universe does not exhaust or delimit the power of God. So in *De Docta Ignorantia* there is no antinomy, because Nicholas does not subscribe unqualifiedly to what Blumenberg ascribes to him as “on the one hand.” Moreover, Nicholas has not changed his position in the sermon “*Dies Sanctificatus*,” preached on Christmas Day, 1440 (and, therefore, subsequently to the completion of *De Docta Ignorantia*).<sup>458</sup> For even in the sermon Nicholas is not advancing a view different from the view that God created a world which was the most perfect it could be. And as in *De Docta Ignorantia*, so too in the sermon he appeals to the doctrine of Incarnation not in order to resolve an antinomy but in order to explain how all the things which went out from God, their Beginning, will also return unto God, their End.

6.8.2. In delineating the structure of Nicholas’s reasoning in *De Docta Ignorantia* III, 2-3, Blumenberg does not represent this structure altogether accurately. “Among the actual objects of the world, among the totality of contracted things,” writes Blumenberg, “there must be an actual thing that exhausts the possibility of the species in which it exists.”<sup>459</sup> This statement of Blumenberg’s is incompatible with his immediately succeeding quotation from Nicholas’s text. That is, Nicholas does not say “there *must* be . . .”; he says “if a maximum which is contracted to a species could be posited as actually existing, then . . .”<sup>460</sup> Blumenberg himself proceeds to acknowledge the hypothetical character of Nicholas’s argument. And he recognizes that Nicholas’s later <sup>461</sup> assertion that there is such a maximum, viz., Christ, is an assertion that Nicholas regards as confirmed by *historical* considerations more than by *rationibus necessariis*. But Blumenberg still needs to make clear the following important difference between the reasoning in *De Docta Ignorantia* III and that of the sermon “*Dies Sanctificatus*”: although the latter explicitly and emphatically affirms that unless God had assumed a human nature the universe could not have been perfect (indeed, could not at all have

existed), the former contains this point only as a tacit implication. For in *De Docta Ignorantia* III, 3 (202:14-17)<sup>462</sup> we read that "all things—through most absolute God and by the mediation of the universal contraction, viz., the humanity [of Christ]—go forth into contracted being so that they may be that-which-they-are in the best order and manner possible." Presumably, then: unless Christ were God and man, i.e., unless the Son of God assumed a human nature, all things could not have gone forth into contracted being in the best order possible (and thus could not have gone forth at all, since God would not create that which is less perfect than it could be).

6.8.3. Blumenberg's treatment of Cusanus draws toward an end,<sup>463</sup> with an observation that needs further precision: "Nowhere [in *De Docta Ignorantia*] is there talk of the fact that man's sin compelled God to sacrifice His son. The Creation, not sin, the deficiency of nature, not that of man, presses toward this consequence."<sup>464</sup> But this claim is a conjunction of two false disjunctions: (1) Either creation or sin, but not both, presses toward the consequence of Christ's sacrificial death and (2) either the deficiency of nature or the deficiency of man, but not both, presses toward this same consequence. Yet, within the framework of *De Docta Ignorantia* all four disjuncts are true: both the creation and sin, both the deficiency of nature and the deficiency of man press toward the consequence of Christ's sacrificial death. Let us focus primarily upon the themes of sin and the "deficiency" of man, since these are the themes that Blumenberg purports to be unfindable in *De Docta Ignorantia*—at least unfindable insofar as there follows from them the theme of Christ's sacrificial death. Now, in Chapter 7 of Book III Nicholas reasons:

Since it was not fitting for human nature to be led to the triumph of immortality otherwise than through victory over death, [Christ] underwent death in order that human nature would rise again with Him to eternal life and that the animal, mortal body would become spiritual and incorruptible. [Christ] was able to be a true man only if He was mortal; and He was able to lead mortal [human] nature to immortality only if through death human nature became stripped of mortality.<sup>465</sup>

Unlike Anselm of Canterbury,<sup>466</sup> Nicholas seems to regard mortality as an essential condition of the natural (i.e., the unsupernaturally transformed) human body, even though immortality is the natural condition of the human intellect.<sup>467</sup> According to the foregoing quota-

tion from Nicholas: when human beings are resurrected, their bodies will be transformed into an incorruptible state.<sup>468</sup> Human nature, which is the actually highest species within the genus *animal*, is a middle nature between the higher purely intellectual beings (viz., angels) and the lower nonintellectual, corporeal beings. Mortality of body belonged to the original degree of perfection of human nature (to which immortality of body would have been given as a reward, had Adam not sinned). Accordingly, Nicholas states that Christ "was able to be a true man only if He was mortal . . ."<sup>469</sup> Through the resurrection of Christ, in which all men are to participate, each individual human nature will be transformed in such way that each respective human body will become immortal. This transformation will be a supernatural elevation of human nature beyond its natural state: "All of us, whether good or evil, shall arise; but not all of us shall be changed through a glory which transforms us—through Christ, the Son of God—into adopted sons. Therefore, all shall arise through Christ, but not all shall arise as Christ and in Christ through union; rather, only those who are Christ's through faith, hope, and love [shall so arise]."<sup>470</sup> In this elevation human nature will not be changed into another kind of thing, though it will exist in another manner.<sup>471</sup> Those human beings who have chosen to be united with God will receive the fulfillment of their intellectual desires.<sup>472</sup> Those who have rejected God will, though resurrected, be separated from God and hurled into the chaos of confusion, maintains Nicholas.<sup>473</sup>

So in *De Docta Ignorantia* Nicholas teaches that one reason Christ died was in order to lead human nature to victory over death. But in Chapter 6 of Book III he offers another reason as well—a more properly theological reason: Christ died in order to purge all the sins of human nature.<sup>474</sup> His voluntary death, proclaims Nicholas, was "the deletion and purgation of, and the satisfaction for, all the carnal desires of human nature."<sup>475</sup> Here the word "satisfaction" is important, because it shows that Nicholas is addressing himself to the theological theme of atonement. Earlier, using theological language, he stated that in Christ we have redemption and remission of sins.<sup>476</sup> In Chapter 6 this theme is again touched upon. We are justified only by faith in Christ, he declares.<sup>477</sup> Moreover, whatever Christ *merited* by His suffering He merited for those who are one with Him.<sup>478</sup> Indeed, since Christ delivered Himself unto death even on behalf of

His enemies, His humanity "made up for all the defects of all men,"<sup>479</sup> though, of course, His merit must be appropriated by each believer, according to his degree of faith. So in *De Docta Ignorantia* III Nicholas does address himself to the themes of sin and the deficiency of man.<sup>480</sup> And thus he gives a theological as well as a philosophical account of the purpose of Christ's death.<sup>481</sup> If he does not dwell upon the topic of man's sinfulness and the need for atonement through the death of Christ, it is not because he considers the topic inessential to his line of reasoning but because here he has no new contribution to make.<sup>482</sup>

6.9. Given the many misconceptions, half-truths, and imprecisions in Blumenberg's interpretation of Nicholas's cosmology, philosophical anthropology, and Christology, it would be almost a miracle if his overall interpretation of Nicholas's role in Western intellectual history were correct. Blumenberg sees Nicholas as concerned for "the continuance of the medieval world,"<sup>483</sup> as acutely concerned "regarding the disintegration of the Middle Ages,"<sup>484</sup> as attempting "to save the Middle Ages,"<sup>485</sup> as exhibiting a conservative tendency.<sup>486</sup> In reaching this assessment, he affirms that Nicholas's works contain no "explicit evidence of his knowledge of the critical situation of the epoch to which he still wholly belongs."<sup>487</sup> That is, Nicholas did not explicitly formulate questions regarding the viability of the Middle Ages, did not explicitly formulate a policy to prevent, or at least to retard, the disintegration of the Middle Ages. In short, contends Blumenberg, Cusanus "did not *formulate* his concern for the continuance of the age. *But the unity of his thought can be understood precisely and only on the basis of such a concern.*"<sup>488</sup> And so, Blumenberg, adhering to this judgment about unity, sets out to *project back* behind Nicholas's thought questions which Nicholas himself did not formulate—questions which, Blumenberg admits, Nicholas *could not* have formulated.<sup>489</sup> Blumenberg posits as his own hermeneutical task: to take Nicholas's statements, doctrines, dogmas, speculations, and postulates—insofar as they are documented—and to work them into answers to the projected questions, i.e., answers to the questions the author himself did not and could not formulate.<sup>490</sup> Nowhere does Blumenberg make an effort to justify what he is blissful merely to assert: viz., that the unity of Nicholas's thought can be understood only by ascribing to Nicholas a concern for preserving the medieval world.

Nowhere does Blumenberg show an interest in eliciting from Nicholas's texts themselves questions for which there is some evidence that they were the author's. Much of his misidentification of Nicholas's doctrines—e.g., the doctrines of freedom, of cognition, of conjecture, of providence, of perfection, of exemplars, of creation, of teleology, of faith, of the need for Christ's death—results from his having projected his own questions behind Nicholas's thought before first eliciting Nicholas's questions from out of Nicholas's own *problématique*. To be sure, there is a place, hermeneutically, for an interpreter's bringing to bear upon an author's works questions which the author himself did not ask—questions which, perhaps, the author was not in a position even to formulate. At times such questions will assist in identifying what the author's doctrines are; at other times they will help in understanding the historical significance or historical influence of the author's doctrines. The problem with Blumenberg's self-imposed hermeneutical task, then, is not that it projects back questions which Nicholas himself did not ask or could not even formulate. The main problem is that it does this projecting before—and even in place of—conducting a serious investigation of what Nicholas's doctrines are and of what Nicholas's own questions were. And the absence of such a primary investigation results in Blumenberg's wrongly identifying Nicholas's doctrines and, consequently, wrongly taking these misidentifications to be answers to the questions that Nicholas could not formulate but which Blumenberg formulates for him and projects back behind the misidentifications.

As a result of the inaccurate identifications Blumenberg projects back the wrong questions. Moreover, by making the misidentifications into answers to these questions he further distorts the already-misidentified doctrines. Earlier we caught a glimpse of a prime instance of this further distortion when we observed Blumenberg's judgment about Nicholas's "holding fast to the critical achievements of nominalism."<sup>491</sup> Instead of seriously endeavoring to answer the primary question 'How did Nicholas view the relationship between concepts and reality?' Blumenberg skips lightly over this question<sup>492</sup> and seems<sup>493</sup> to press toward tacitly asking a secondary one: 'How is Nicholas showing his concern to save the Middle Ages?' When the misidentified doctrine about Nicholas's holding fast to the critical achievements of nominalism is taken as one answer to this secondary



question, Nicholas's position become further distorted, so that Blumenberg comes to speak of Nicholas's "inability to deal with or successfully to evade the consequences of nominalism"<sup>494</sup>—as if Nicholas had worked himself into an intellectual impasse.

That Blumenberg has little conception either of textual interpretation or of historical method is confirmed by the fact that he makes little or nothing of the texts which show that Nicholas was *not* straining to hold together a world he considered to be disintegrating. Now, the only work where Nicholas might plausibly be suspected of making such an effort is *De Docta Ignorantia*. But even *there* Nicholas is not exercised about holding together something regarded as crumbling: he is concerned with saying what is new, even if it is not altogether new. In the prologue to Book I he alludes to his work as setting forth unusual things, though not things hitherto completely unknown.<sup>495</sup> Likewise, at the outset of Book II, Chapter 11 he intimates: "Now that learned ignorance has shown these previously unheard of [doctrines] to be true, perhaps there will be amazement on the part of those who read them." This idea is later repeated: "Book Two elicits a few [teachings] about the universe—[teachings which go] beyond the usual approach of the philosophers and [which will seem] unusual to many."<sup>496</sup> In the *Apologia* the approach taken in *De Docta Ignorantia* is said to differ from other approaches "as much as sight differs from hearing."<sup>497</sup> Furthermore, the *Apologia* also affirms of *De Docta Ignorantia*: "This speculation will surely conquer all the modes of reasoning of all the philosophers, although it is difficult to leave behind things to which we are accustomed."<sup>498</sup>

So Nicholas is not striving to hold onto the old: he is striving to present that which is new, viz., the method of learned ignorance and the central truths that he deems derivable by means of it. Of course, he points out that the method of learned ignorance is as old as Socrates and that it is acknowledged by Dionysius and by Augustine. But the fact remains that he envisions his use of the method as yielding truths whereof Socrates, Dionysius, and Augustine did not themselves know. He makes no attempt to hold together the medieval intellectual world, since he does not see it as intellectually endangered.<sup>499</sup> And the reason he does not perceive it as threatened is that he is too centrally a part of it. He can be intent upon presenting *nouveautés* precisely because they seem to him to be *unendangering*.

Even the newness that pervades his Christology and that Wenck judged heretical is regarded by him as altogether unproblematical and as according with Scripture.<sup>500</sup> He seeks to expand the horizons of the medieval world, to penetrate beyond its confines by drawing the consistent consequences of the premises that God is Infinity itself, that man cannot intellectually transcend the condition of learned ignorance, that Aristotelian logic, though valid for the domain of human experience, cannot, cooperatively with experience, ascertain the nature of God. This first modern philosopher neither breaks with the medieval world nor attempts to save it. Rather, he opens the door to Modernity by developing concepts and motifs which, had they been carried further, had they been more influential, had they been detached from their traditional associations, would have ushered in the Modern Age, instead of simply signaling its possibility. Accordingly, the first modern philosopher precedes the main advent of the Modern Age and is not himself "the Father of modern philosophy," an ascription still rightly reserved for Descartes. Finally, his concern with the new and his reinterpretation of the old—whether in *De Docta Ignorantia*, *De Coniecturis*, the *Idiota* dialogues, the mathematical treatises, or wherever—does not so strain the unity of his thought that we can understand this unity *only* by ascribing to him a concern to continue the Middle Ages.

In the end, what Blumenberg is doing is not *describing* for us how Nicholas himself viewed his intellectual situation or what Nicholas's real concerns within that situation were: he is *recommending* that we picture Nicholas *as if* he had viewed his situation in a certain way and *as if* he had exhibited such and such a concern. And this recommendation Blumenberg passes off as historical interpretation, even though it runs counter to the historical evidence.

7. *Conclusion.* We have seen that just as the unity of Nicholas's thought can be understood otherwise than on the basis of a "concern for the continuance"<sup>501</sup> of the Middle Ages, so the unity that is called *coincidentia oppositorum* was at no time intended "*only* to bring about mystical obscurification."<sup>502</sup> We have seen, too, that the unity sought by Nicholas above all else is the unity of sonship.<sup>503</sup> This relationship is attained through faith and love; and it is brought to fulfillment in the next life.

7.1. But on his pilgrim's pathway Nicholas seeks a foretaste of that future blissful union. In *De Visione Dei* he looks for this foretaste in and through mystical encounter; and he intimates that such savoring has not yet been granted to him.<sup>504</sup> Thus, in *De Visione Dei* he is not writing about actual mystical encounters of God on his own part. There is nothing that resembles the intimatelike accounts of St. Teresa of Avila. One reason why interpreters of *De Visione Dei* have labelled Nicholas's approach *speculative* mysticism has been to mark it off from these other accounts—as well as to call attention to its self-consciously metaphysical and theological orientation. For Nicholas is pointing the way, by means of reflective meditation, to the place where mystical encounter is possible—a place “beyond all sensible, rational, and intellectual sight.”<sup>505</sup> But what, then, are we to make of his exclamation?: “Lord, my God, I see You by means of a certain mental rapture.”<sup>506</sup> And what is to be said regarding his further statements?:

Through a foretaste of the sweetness of a glorious life You draw [me unto Yourself], so that I may love You, who are infinite good. You enrapture me, in order that I may transcend myself and foresee the glorious place to which You invite me. You show me many exceedingly appetizing repasts that attract me by their most appealing aroma. You permit [me] to see the treasure of riches, of life, of joy, and of beauty.<sup>507</sup>

With these utterances Nicholas is not making implicit claims to have been mystically raptured or to have mystically partaken of Divine Beauty. Rather, in a metaphorical way he is applying the language of mystical encounter to nonmystical intellectual recognition. Just as someone's mystical vision of God in Christ is different from his non-mystical intellectual recognition that God is encounterable “only where persuasive considerations cease and faith appears,”<sup>508</sup> so his enrapturement beyond all intellect is different from the mental enrapturement which accompanies the recognition that God, because He is Infinity itself, is unseeable as He is in Himself. So too, the foretasting that occurs in *visione mystica* differs from the mental foretasting whereby the Gospel is believed to be food from Heaven and Jesus to be the Tree of Life.<sup>509</sup> At times, so we have seen, Nicholas alludes to religious experience in only a broad sense that is presumed to need no explication: “if anyone believes and accepts, he will most truly find that You descended from Heaven and that You alone are the

Teacher of truth."<sup>510</sup> But in *De Visione Dei* he aims primarily at leading the monks of Tegernsee into darkness with Moses, so that they may be raptured with Paul.<sup>511</sup> This guidance is given by means of the symbolism of the icon, though elsewhere it is provided through the symbolic name "*possest*,"<sup>512</sup> and even through the names "*idem*,"<sup>513</sup> "*non-aliud*,"<sup>514</sup> and "*posse*."<sup>515</sup>

7.2. When Nicholas assumed active administration of the diocese of Brixen in the spring of 1452, he must have suspected that his efforts to set in order its spiritual and financial affairs would provoke immediate resistance. But he had not reckoned with the prolong and intense dispute that would erupt with Duke Sigismund. Little wonder that already in February of 1454 he expressed to the abbot of the monastery at Tegernsee the wish to have a cell prepared for him: "*Retrahor tamen plurimum ab hijs altissimis per huius mundi occupationes; propterea fratribus dixi michi cellam parari. Utinam concederetur michi sacro ocio frui inter fratres, qui vacant et vident quoniam suavis est dominus.*"<sup>516</sup> If mystical theology requires withdrawal and detachment,<sup>517</sup> it also leads to rest and silence.<sup>518</sup> But it leads likewise to joy, because it is the fulfillment of love. "Fire does not cease from its flame and neither does the burning love which is directed toward You, O God. You are the Form of everything desirable . . . ." <sup>519</sup> The discernment that God is unknowable as He is in Himself moves Nicholas not to resignation or despair but to the following conclusion: "that the reason You, O God, are unknown to all creatures is so that amid this most sacred ignorance creatures may be more content, as if [they were situated] amid a countless and inexhaustible treasure. For one who finds a treasure of such kind that he knows it to be altogether uncountable and infinite is filled with much greater joy than is one who finds a countable and finite treasure."<sup>520</sup> Under Nicholas's tutelage, the monks of Tegernsee seem to have come to this same recognition. Certainly their prior, Bernard of Waging, was one of Nicholas's staunchest defenders. Neither Nicholas nor Bernard interpreted what had come to be called the *via purae intelligentiae* as excluding all cognition. For during the first stages of mystical ascent into darkness the intellect, whose impetus comes from love of the Good, must be aware that it is ascending amid an obscuring mist<sup>521</sup> and must believe that it is ascending toward the Good.<sup>522</sup> But, concomitantly, it must be aware that the Infinite Good which it

seeks transcends every finite good that it can conceive—aware that Infinite Goodness is not goodness but is Infinity.<sup>523</sup> Thus, the intellect ascends unto that which it judges to be the Perfection of everything perfectible;<sup>524</sup> and yet, though the intellect can conceive that there is such a Perfection, it cannot conceive of the nature of this Perfection—cannot conceive of it, that is, other than by way of symbols whose significations fall infinitely short of the reality. The intellect's knowing that it cannot know *what* God is—any more than it can know what pure being is—constitutes its state of learned ignorance. And this state is a necessary condition of the intellect's transcending its own operation, in order to encounter the Unknown unknowingly.

Among the Tegernsee monks there may well have been those who identified themselves more closely with Gerson's emphasis upon the *via devotionis* than with Nicholas's emphasis upon *docta ignorantia*. Some may even have shunned Nicholas's interpretation of mystical theology on the grounds that Nicholas, under the influence of Gerson, had deviated from the true teachings of Dionysius; in so doing, they would have been setting themselves in agreement with Vincent, Prior of the Carthusian monastery at Aggsbach. Whatever the diverse reactions of the Tegernsee community may possibly have been with regard to *De Visione Dei*, the reaction of record is Caspar Ayndorffer's: "O happy compendium, through which the Blessed End desired by all is so easily and quickly attained . . . !" <sup>525</sup> Nicholas had indeed meant to point toward the Blessed End, as well as toward the preconditions thereunto: "O Christ, our Savior, You taught only two things: faith and love. Through faith the intellect approaches unto the Word; through love it is united therewith." <sup>526</sup> *Fides formata charitate*<sup>527</sup> is prerequisite to *visio dei* and to the final attainment of *perfectio*. Nicholas is aware that the notions of *fides* and *perfectio* require a deeper philosophical analysis than he anywhere provides. But he is content to leave the task of this analysis to others. His own mission he sees as furnishing *Hinweise*—pointers, indicators. What else are his discussions of learned ignorance, coincidence of opposites, infinite disproportionality, *universum infinitum privative*, God as the universe's center and circumference? And what else is furnished by his dialectic and paradox?

In opening the door to Modernity, Nicholas does not surrender his

pre-Modern standpoint: viz., the conception of a hierarchical world, containing a gradation of more and less perfect genera-and-species contracted to individual objects which in varying degrees of perfection<sup>528</sup> fulfill their respective genus and species (with the human species being an intellectual nature than which there is no more perfect intellectual nature on any of the other "stars")<sup>529</sup>—in short, a world wherein "all existing things endeavor, as best they can, to participate in God's 'brightness and blazing splendor,' so to speak."<sup>530</sup> Only when the intellect transforms the philosophical mode-of-reflecting into a contemplative mode that suspends all activity of the senses and all mental analysis—only then can the soul, in proportion to its faith and love, draw mystically near unto Him who is beyond the distinction between modern and premodern, unto Him whom Augustine apostrophized as "Beauty so ancient and so new."<sup>531</sup> Nicholas of Cusa's *theologia mystica* teaches that the devout believer may possibly attain unto a vision of this Beauty in the present lifetime if he figuratively enters into the seclusion of the monk's cell, cognitively and affectionally abandoning the outside world during the contemplative ascent. Gerson thought that any necessity for cognitive abandonment would exclude simple believers from the *via mystica*, since many such believers would be incapable of attaining the state of *pura intelligentia*.<sup>532</sup> Thus, Gerson accommodated his version of *theologia mystica* to the *via devotionis*, thereby so attenuating it that it seemed to many to lack both depth and power.<sup>533</sup> By contrast, Nicholas shows no signs of supposing that the pathway of mystical theology is available to all believers. Indeed, his conclusion in *De Visione Dei* is not an exhortation, generally, to the brothers of the Tegernsee community. It is rather a query to himself ("Why, then, do I delay? . . . What holds me back?") conjoined with a prayer regarding himself: "Draw me, O Lord, because no one can come unto You unless he be drawn by You. [Draw me] so that, being drawn, I may be freed from this world and be joined unto You, the Absolute God, in an eternity of glorious life. Amen."