

# DIVINITY

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## Nicholas of Cusa: Human Nature and the Image of God

PART OF THE REVOLUTIONARY character of modern thought is the gradually emerging vision of human being as creative being, a vision that arises out of the Christian belief in the creative power of God. From the Christian belief that humanity is created in God's image, there is a gradual development, throughout the medieval period, of the idea that human nature is analogous to the divine nature. As a result, many of the characteristics or attributes of the Christian God are extended, analogically, to human beings. As I have argued elsewhere, chief among these analogically extended attributes is God's creative power or creative will.<sup>1</sup> This creative capacity may be generally defined as the divine power to act as the sole, unconditioned cause of a given effect. This is typically referred to as God's infinite freedom or creative will. There is some debate within the medieval tradition as to the relation between God's will and God's reason, but for our purposes we will focus on those who generally assign primacy to God's will as the unconditioned, unquestionable ground or source of all that exists. Thus, God's creative will is sometimes referred to as God's omnipotence or the power of *creatio ex nihilo*. This creative capacity can also be expressed in terms of the asymmetrical relation of radical dependence that exists between God and 'his' creatures. As the sole cause of creation, God functions as the absolute condition or ground upon which all existence, possible or actual, ultimately

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Rose, "Creativity, Freedom and the Promise of Knowledge: An Historical Overview," PhD Dissertation, Queen's U, 1997.

depends. Understood in this sense, existence is a function of creation. To exist is to stand in a necessarily dependent relation to God's creative power.

The analogical extension of God's creative will to human beings is first developed, in a systematic manner, by Augustine of Hippo. By extending to human beings the creative power of *free will*, Augustine makes humanity the sole cause of sin and evil in the world, thereby shifting the burden of responsibility for evil from God to us. The analogical extension of God's creative will to human beings through the idea of free will is a well developed (if highly contested) theme throughout the medieval world. In fact, the development of the idea of free will is sometimes pointed to as one of the more important distinguishing features between the classical and medieval views of human nature.<sup>2</sup> It is an idea that reverberates throughout much of medieval thought, helping to recast the general sphere of ethics and morality and the idea of individual responsibility in an importantly new light.

As I hope to show, however, the medieval transformation of the classical idea of human nature did not end there. The analogical extension of God's creative power to human nature also plays itself out in other ways as well. For example, it is within this general framework that we witness the emergence of what Amos Funkenstein has termed an "*ergetic*" ideal of knowledge, "the ideal of knowing through *doing* or knowing by *construction*."<sup>3</sup> As Funkenstein rightly argues, it is the addition of the active element of construction or *creation* to the ideal of knowledge which sets the modern world apart from classical and medieval world-views. Drawing upon a useful distinction made explicit by Antonio Pérez-Ramos, where the classical and medieval promise of knowledge may be generally characterized as a *user's* or *beholder's* tradition, the modern marks the beginning of a *maker's* ideal of knowledge, that is, an ideal where the "criteria of knowledge and criteria of construction are thought to coincide in various degrees."<sup>4</sup> The early

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<sup>2</sup> See Albrecht Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982), and A. C. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> *Theology and the Scientific Imagination: From the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986) 297-98.

<sup>4</sup> *Francis Bacon's Idea of Science and the Maker's Knowledge Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) 150.

modern turn towards the idea of maker's knowledge (i.e., knowledge grounded in the activity of the creative subject) is itself sustained and made plausible by the medieval tradition of creativity from which it emerges. Borne by a thousand years of careful germination, the principle of creative freedom inherent within the Christian perspective slowly emerges within the modern as the defining condition both of human nature and of existence in general. The humanistic optimism made possible both by the ideal of creative freedom and by the constructive promise of knowledge associated with it helps to give rise to a new sense of adventure, exploration and discovery that is characteristic of the Renaissance and the modern world in general. As Hans Blumenberg notes:

The ancient wise man secures for himself the space of his undisputedness by not meddling with what is not open to his power of disposition. He seeks his happiness as inwardness. The new premise, however, is that man does not meet with the boundary between what is and what is not at his disposal as a fixed determination, but rather that he begins to regard nature also as something potentially masterable.<sup>5</sup>

The idea of creative freedom inherited from the medieval world gives rise to the modern ideals of freedom and knowledge as creative or constructive in character, becoming the means of shaping one's destiny rather than being subject to its fates.

Focussing for the moment on the work of Nicholas of Cusa, I shall show how the medieval picture of human being as creative being also played itself out in these other spheres as well. Cusanus' constructivist account of knowledge combined with his revolutionary vision of humanity and its place in nature establish him as a pivotal figure in the transition from a medieval to a modern world view. Combining Neoplatonic ideas with those found within later forms of nominalism, Cusanus develops an idea of humanity and its relation to the divine that is both old and new. Of particular importance is Cusanus' nominalist affirmation of the radical sepa-

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<sup>5</sup> *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993) 541.

ration of God from the created order of things. In the tradition of negative theology, Cusanus claims that because of the radical separation of the divine from the worldly, we can never claim to have any positive, discursive knowledge of God's nature; God's nature lies beyond the limits of any discursive expression or understanding. However, the story does not end there. For while discursive reason may never provide us with any direct knowledge of God, it does, nevertheless, play a crucial role in moving us to recognize another feature of human being, namely, our divinely inspired creative spirit or nature. By recognizing the limits of our discursive nature we may come to recognize in ourselves the creative spirit that serves as the unifying, grounding condition of our discursive knowledge and of our human mode of being in general. Since the unifying, creative power that serves as the ground of discursive reason and of human being in general is thought to be analogous to the creative spirit that best defines God, then it is in our capacity as creative beings that we are closest in nature (at least in the most important sense) to the divine. It is through the exercise of our creative spirit, both in the mode of knowing and in the mode of material production, that we are best able to attain, in a practical sort of manner, a deeper, more genuine accord between ourselves and the divine.<sup>6</sup> Our primary relation to the divine is thus best defined in terms of creative making or doing rather than discursive knowing, a mode of making that actively employs discursive knowledge both for the advance of our understanding of ourselves and the world, and, most importantly, for the development of what Cusanus calls our *learned ignorance* of the divine. In what follows we shall see that Cusanus' constructivist account of knowledge, which strongly foreshadows some of the major turns in modern epistemology that we find in such writers as Kant, clearly emerges as an analogue of God's creative relation to the world. Similarly,

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<sup>6</sup> I should note here that while Cusanus may have pointed the way towards Renaissance humanism, it is not clear that he had given himself over entirely to such humanistic ideals. More often than not, Cusanus is portrayed as a transitional figure who stands halfway between the Renaissance and the Middle Ages. We need not decide one way or another whether Cusanus was a true humanist, a transitional figure, or whether he remained very much within the medieval tradition. All that needs to be said is that he at the very least points the way to a humanistic perspective.

Cusanus' oddly humanistic vision of humanity as social and political being, a vision which again clearly foreshadows later Renaissance and Enlightenment ideals, is also best understood as an expression of our divinely inspired creative capacity to reshape the world in our image (just as God has created us in 'his').

*Cusanus, Learned Ignorance and the Creative Subject*

As already noted, Cusanus' work originates squarely within the tradition of negative theology. Combining elements from both the Neoplatonic and nominalist traditions, Cusanus proceeds from an original belief in the radical separation of God from creation, a separation which results in the absolute ineffability of the divine. Cusanus proceeds from an original standpoint of *learned ignorance*, that is, the recognition of the radical opposition between the being of God and the being of finite, creaturely existence. However, as Ernst Cassirer points out, what distinguishes Cusanus from the more negative, mystical tradition is that, for him, the opposition between the being of the infinite and the finite "is no longer merely dogmatically posited; rather it must be understood in its ultimate depth and conceived of through the conditions of human knowledge. This position towards the problem of knowledge makes of Cusanus the first modern thinker. His first step consists in asking not about God, but about the possibility of knowledge about God."<sup>77</sup> It is from within this creative, epistemic turn that Cusanus' thought begins to diverge from the purely ascetic ideal of the mystical tradition in favour of a more positive, constructivist conception of knowledge grounded in creative freedom.

Cusanus' model of knowledge centres upon the explication of creatively self-unfolding, constructive principles. Cusanus redefines the search for knowledge as a *conjectural art* rather than a formalizable process of syllogistic deduction or logical disclosure. For Cusanus, we *create* the conjectural world of our own rational understanding in a way that is analogous to God's creation of the world at large. Through the creative self-unfolding of the conjectural art we realize our nature as creative beings and in the process move towards a true or genuine accord with the divine.

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<sup>77</sup> *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. Mario Domandi (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1983) 10.

As with the Neoplatonic and Christian traditions of divine transcendence, for Cusanus, the primary principle or mode for the expression of the divine is through metaphor. However, unlike much of the negative theological tradition, with Cusanus, the role of metaphor is not solely negative, the unwelcome consequence of some human limit or shortcoming. Instead, metaphor itself is cast in a positive light as a creative means for developing a more intimate relation to the divine. As Pauline Moffitt Watts argues, for Cusanus, metaphor is generally cast in the positive role as “the cornerstone of the conjectural art and, as such, it is the basis for man’s creation and expression of his conjectural world.”<sup>8</sup>

For Cusanus, the metaphorical nature of knowledge is itself evidence of our special relationship with the divine and of our being created in God’s image. The ability to employ metaphors as we do is an extension, not simply of our finitude and the metaphysical disjunction which exists between God and humanity, but of our nature as creative beings. In their capacity to carry us beyond the limits of discursive understanding, metaphors play a central role in the perfection of our conjectural art, allowing us to better exercise our creative capacity as the primary link between ourselves and the divine. In the words of Moffitt Watts:

Metaphorical thinking, although still the necessary consequence of metaphysical disjunction, is not simply the limited means through which man must formulate and communicate his experience. Cusanus’ symbols are disproportionate ones, finally valid only through the “learned ignorance” of the intellect, not through the power of the reason. But because the human mind is the image of the divine mind, these disproportionate symbols are also now the way in which man discovers and asserts his own individual spirit and intellect and in this links himself to God and the universe.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Nicolaus Cusanus: A Fifteenth-Century Vision of Man* (Leiden: Brill, 1982) 90–91.

<sup>9</sup> *Cusanus* 115–16.

Again, the exercise of the creative activity associated with the metaphorical mode of knowing helps establish our special place as beings created in the image of the divine. This view of metaphor as creatively extending our discursive understanding is further supported by Cusanus' constructive account of knowledge in general.

*Intellect, Reason and Sense*

According to Cusanus, rational knowledge and intellectual understanding, while not divine in themselves, are made nevertheless in the image of the divine. The human mind was created in God's image such that whatever is present in God is also present within us as its image:

everything present in the absolute art in utter truth is present in our mind as in an image. So the mind is created by the creator's art, just as if that art wished to create itself, but since the infinite art is impossible to multiply, its image arises.<sup>10</sup>

Because everything in mind is the image of the divine, then human knowing must be a creative activity that mirrors the creative activity of the divine. The search for knowledge, as an image of the self-identical, creative nature of divine knowing, must therefore be a dynamic process of constructive discovery. The process of discovery is the constructive unfolding of the conditions of intelligibility that are constituted, and hence made possible, by the creative activity of mind. The human mind creates the conditions of knowing through its own constructive unfolding. Thus, all forms of human knowledge ultimately originate within and flow from the creative power or capacity that defines human being, a capacity which mirrors once again the creative capacity of the divine.

Man therefore is God, but not absolutely, since he is man. Hence he is a human god. Man is also the world, but he is not everything by contraction, since he is man. Man is therefore a microcosm or, in truth, a human world. Thus, the region of humanity itself encloses God and the

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<sup>10</sup> Cusanus, *The Layman: About Mind*, trans. C.L. Miller (New York: Abaris Books, 1979) 87.

universal region in its human power. Thus man is able to be a human god, and as god, he is able humanly to be a human angel, a human beast, a human lion or bear, or anything else. Indeed, everything exists within the potentiality of humanity according to its mode.<sup>11</sup>

According to Cusanus, mind is comprised of three distinct 'faculties' or 'powers': *intellect*, *reason*, and *sense*. All knowledge proceeds from a dynamic *unfolding*, through discursive reason, of what is *enfolded* or 'contained' within the creative unity of intellect. All knowledge is made possible by the discursive unfolding or making explicit of the conditions, rules or principles that are creatively enfolded within the unity of intellect. Expressed in more contemporary terms, the creative unity of intellect enfolds or 'contains' within itself the conditions for the possibility of rational knowledge or discursive thought. As the condition for the possibility of rational knowledge, the creative unity of the intellect thus stands as the image of God's place as the 'enfolding of all enfoldings,' that is, as the condition for the possibility of existence per se: "As God is the enfolding of enfolding, so the mind, as God's image, is the image of enfolding of enfoldings .... By being the image of the absolute enfolding which is the infinite mind, mind has the power to assimilate itself to every unfolding."<sup>12</sup> As created in God's image, our relation to the world and to what is humanly knowable is defined as a creative or constructive relation that is directly analogous to God's relation to existence as such. Just as the conditions for the possibility of the being and intelligibility of the world are to be found in the creative nature of God, so too, the conditions for the possibility of human knowing are to be found in the creative nature of human mind: "Just as God has in himself the exemplars of all things so that he can form all things, so does the human mind have the exemplars of all things in itself so that it can know all things."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cusanus, *De Coniecturis*, quoted in Moffitt Watts, *Cusanus* 109.

<sup>12</sup> *The Layman* 51.

<sup>13</sup> *The Game of Spheres*, trans. Pauline Moffitt Watts (New York: Abaris Books, 1986) 99.



Where *intellect* represents the creative unity from which all possible knowledge is unfolded, *reason* is the creative unfolding of the conditions of knowing enfolded within intellect. Reason is defined as the power of distinguishing, of “counting up and enumerating,”<sup>14</sup> through proportionate measure:

The mind assimilates things in the same way it assimilates visible things in seeing; audible things in hearing, the flavourful in taste, what has odour in smell, what is touchable in touch, what is sensible in sense, the imaginable in imagination, and what can be reasoned about in reason. The image operates in the absence of sensible objects as does any sense—without distinguishing objects. When sense objects are not present it conforms itself to them in a confused way without distinguishing one condition of the object from another. But in reason mind conforms itself to things and distinguishes one condition from another.<sup>15</sup>

As God creates things to be what they are, so we, through discursive reason, create concepts or notions by which we can know things as they are in the image of mind; “mind makes all things notionally.”<sup>16</sup> We order or construct the world in a cognitively accessible manner through concepts or notions that are unfolded from, and hence made possible by, mind itself. As C.L. Miller puts it, “The conceptual entities we fashion mentally are no less dependent on us than the entities of the created cosmos are dependent on God.”<sup>17</sup> The world as we know it is thus the world as ordered or constructed according to concepts or notions creatively unfolded from mind as such.

The clearest expression of Cusanus’ account of mind as the condition for the possibility of the creative enfolding and unfolding of knowledge can be found in his treatment of mathematical

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<sup>14</sup> *The Game of Spheres* 103.

<sup>15</sup> *The Layman* 63.

<sup>16</sup> *The Game of Spheres* 99.

<sup>17</sup> “Nicholas of Cusa’s *On Conjectures (De coniecturis)*,” *Nicholas of Cusa: In Search of God and Wisdom*, ed. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki (Leiden: Brill, 1991) 122.

knowledge. According to Cusanus, unlike all other forms of knowledge, which must remain purely conjectural (i.e., reasonable), mathematical knowledge possesses the characteristic of certainty. For unlike other forms of knowledge, which always include some element that is given to mind, with mathematical knowledge both the meaning and reality of concepts exist as creative constructions of mind itself.<sup>18</sup> Only within mathematics is there nothing which is given to mind of which we then form concepts. Instead, the reality to which mathematical concepts refer is entirely contained within the concepts themselves, as constructed by the creative intellect. With mathematical knowledge then, the mode of knowing and that which is known are one and the same:

the rational soul assimilates itself to the unity or enfolding of number in order that it discern multiplicity, and it unfolds from itself the notional number of multiplicity. Thus it assimilates itself to the point which enfolds magnitude so that it unfolds from itself notional lines, surfaces, and bodies. And from the enfolding of these things, that is from unity and the point, that rational soul unfolds circular and polygonal figures which cannot be unfolded without at the same time unfolding multiplicity and magnitude. In the same way it [the rational soul] assimilates itself to rest, so that it discerns motion and it assimilates itself to the present or "now" itself so that it discerns time.<sup>19</sup>

The unity of intellect from which rational knowledge is unfolded is identical with the unity of the number *one* from which all multiplicity unfolds, and the unity of a geometrical point from which all magnitude unfolds. It is from the absolute identity of knower and that which is known, of concept and its content, that the certainty expressed within mathematics arises.

According to Cusanus, mathematical knowledge is prior in nature (though not in time) to all other forms of conceptual con-

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<sup>18</sup> See Miller, "Cusa's *On Conjectures*" 126, 133–34.

<sup>19</sup> *The Game of Spheres* 105.

struction. This makes all other forms of construction dependent upon mathematical principles. Non-mathematical constructions have their formal basis in a priori mathematical principles, in particular, the mathematical principles of multitude, magnitude, motion, and time. All other concepts or notions are thought to be developments from these four basic mathematical concepts.

While the general conditions of knowledge are rationally unfolded from the unity of mind or intellect, it is only by way of the *senses* that knowing as such inevitably begins. For it is the senses (which Cusanus defines as a dimension of mind as such) that supply the original 'material' that first sets the creative activity of mind in 'motion.' The senses, as the primary source of 'otherness' or 'difference' within mind, supply the mind with an aggregate of 'material' of which it is must attempt to 'make sense.' The senses thus function as a stimulus for cognitive construction and the ordering of received sensations in a cognitively accessible manner. They also serve as a general source of wonder that draws us to question ourselves and our place in the world. Thus, for Cusanus:

the power of the mind which is the power of comprehending things conceptually cannot engage in its activities unless it is stimulated by sensible things, and it cannot be so stimulated except through the mediation of sense images. So the mind requires the kind of organic body without which such stimulation could not occur.<sup>20</sup>

To draw upon a metaphor outlined by Cassirer, it is the senses that provide the fertile soil from which the human mind may grow and bear its final fruits.<sup>21</sup> Employing a framework that is strikingly similar to that of Kant, Cusanus claims that it is the senses that first awaken mind to the call of knowledge, providing our minds with an original and persistent form of stimulation that compels us to create or unfold those concepts or notions that are most adequate to a properly cognitive encounter with the otherness of sensation:

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<sup>20</sup> *The Layman* 53.

<sup>21</sup> *The Individual and the Cosmos* 45.

mind is the discriminating form of reason, just as reason is the discriminating form of the senses and imagination.... It gets the power from being an image of the exemplar of everything, God himself. When the exemplar of everything is manifest in mind as truth in its image, mind possesses the measure to which it refers and in accord with which it judges things outside mind ....

But at the beginning our mental life is like someone asleep until it is roused to activity by wonder at its contact with sensible things.<sup>22</sup>

While all knowledge may be unfolded through the discursive power of reason, it is only through the stimulation provided by the senses that cognition and the general process of mental reflection can proceed. Without the original, stimulating power of the senses, our minds would remain dormant and inactive.

To summarize, reason, for Cusanus, is a dynamic, continually moving capacity or power that draws distinctions and unfolds value judgements from the undifferentiated unity of immediate perception. The judgements and distinctions made by reason are themselves synthesized by the "speculative and assimilative powers of the intellect," the highest form of unity in the human mind.<sup>23</sup> Sense is the fuel which stimulates and hence makes possible the effort towards a progressive, rational explication of discursive understanding.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *The Layman* 55.

<sup>23</sup> Moffitt Watts, *Cusanus* 99–100.

<sup>24</sup> See Moffitt Watts, *Cusanus* 92. According to Moffitt Watts, the unity of the human mind is "the enfolding (*complicatio*) of its conjectural world, and its conjectural world as the unfolding (*explicatio*) of the human mind. This unity or *complicatio* of the human mind is a likeness of the unity of the divine mind, which is the *complicatio* of the universe of created being. That universe is the unfolding (*explicatio*) of the divine mind just as the conjectural universe is the *explicatio* of the human mind. The human mind is therefore the principle or unity of the 'conjectural' universe rather than the 'real' universe. It unfolds from itself 'rational things' (*rationalia*) rather than 'real things' (*entia realia*). It does not know 'real things,' but only 'rational things,' the unfoldings or *explicationes* of its own creative core or *complicatio*. The human mind both unfolds rational things from itself and assimilates the rational things of its own creation. In the process, it gives them meaning."

Since any discovery or form of knowledge is itself the result of humanity's constructive activity as knower, even knowledge of God must be contained within the mind's self-conscious unfolding. However, as Cusanus is quick to point out, while knowledge of the divine is possible, it is not possible absolutely, but humanly, that is, the divine is not present in its nature as absolute, infinite being, but as the image of the divine. Hence, the divine is known, not positively in its own nature, but negatively, as a lack or defect which readily presents itself in our discursive reasoning, a lack which is known analogically through the relation between reason, as discursive unfolding, and intellect, as creative enfolding. As reason is to intellect, so humanity is in relation to the divine.

*Intellect, Reason and the Mind's Road to God*

One of the central points behind all of Cusanus' work is mind's ability to recognize and apprehend its own finitude and the original condition of ignorance implicit within finite understanding. Knowledge of this original ignorance is obtained performatively through the mind's reflective activity. As the unfolding of intellectual unity, reason makes explicit what is creatively implicit within the intellect. Two things follow from reason's discursive unfolding. First, such activity gives rise to a growth in conceptual knowledge, that is, knowledge understood as the knowledge of proportion or measured judgement (i.e., difference). Such knowledge provides us with improved control over the conditions of both human and naturely existence, forms of control which are essential to Cusanus' humanistic ideals of improving or bettering the social and material conditions of our naturely lives. Essential to both is the ideal of progress through creative freedom understood as human self-assertion.

Secondly, and almost paradoxically, the search for knowledge, while humanistically progressive, also serves to move us closer to the divine by advancing our sense of learned ignorance. Through the exercise of our creative capacities we are better able to recognize our dependence upon the divine, thereby bringing our relation to the divine into clearer focus. For while discursive reasoning or 'conceiving' may be necessary for the progress of intellectual understanding, conception always falls short of understanding. All rational or conceptual knowledge is mere imitation (knowledge through opposition or difference). Intellectual understanding, on

the other hand, is not imitation, but perfection (knowledge of the whole or unity). Only through intellectual understanding can we obtain knowledge of what is actual, that is, knowledge which is more than mere imitation:

The power of mind and conceiving and likeness and notion and genus and species are all one and the same. Even though we do not call understanding and conceiving the same thing, nevertheless whatever is understood is conceived and vice versa. But what is actual is understood and not conceived.<sup>25</sup>

The creative enfolding which is mind or intellect extends beyond all possible measure, including both the measure of time and of reason. Instead, it is from the creative unity which is mind that time and all reasonable measures are unfolded and hence made possible (or, perhaps better, made actual):

Mind is the image of eternity, but time is its unfolding, though an unfolding always less than the image of the eternal unfolding. Whoever notices the power of judgment created with mind, through which it assesses all reasons, and notes that reasons stem from mind, sees that no reason reaches the measure of mind. So our mind remains unmeasurable, indefinable, and unlimited by every reason. Only uncreated mind measures, limits and defines our mind, as truth does its own living image created from it and in it and through it.<sup>26</sup>

Reason, as the unfolding of intellect through difference or measure, can never stand as a complete measure of the creative unity which it unfolds.

For Cusanus, the otherness or opposition which constitutes the very mode of reasoning is not itself part of the essence of things. Instead, such otherness is purely contingent, and is subsumed under the principle of unity, and in particular the unity of

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<sup>25</sup> *The Layman* 67.

<sup>26</sup> *The Layman* 93.

the divine.<sup>27</sup> Only in the divine is the opposition of reason and intellect, unity and difference overcome, for the divine is itself “the coincidence of opposites,” the absolute maximum and minimum whose unity nullifies the very law of contradiction upon which such apparent opposition rests.<sup>28</sup>

The disjunction that exists between reason and intellect, a disjunction fully realizable because it stands as a constitutive feature of mind as such, becomes the experiential basis for our learned ignorance of the divine. Our disjunctive relation to the divine is analogous to the disjunctive relation which exists between reason and intellect:

I think that no one can disagree that mind is a sort of living divine number very well proportioned for the suitability of reflecting the divine harmony. Mind comprises every sensible, rational, and intellectual harmony and whatever can be said to be more excellently about this. So every number and every portion and every harmony which come forth from our mind come no closer to reaching our mind than our mind to reaching the infinite mind. Even if mind is a divine number, it is so as a simple unity which brings forth its number from its own power. So the proportion which exists between God's works and God is the same as that between the works of our mind and the mind itself.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *The Game of Spheres* 99.

<sup>28</sup> See Moffitt Watts, *Cusanus* 46, and H. Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*: “This is an exemplary instance of the Cusan’s device of the *coincidentia oppositorum* [coincidence of opposites]. This device makes logical antithesis into marks of world-bound language, which lead outward beyond world-boundness precisely by negating their perceptual contents. In this process, language is a medium that can only be brought into relation to the truth by taking itself as provisional and continuing toward the point of continual self-suspension. Imagination and language reflect one another from the point of view of the limiting case of their self-suspension; but this is no longer an act of medieval humility, no longer the *sacrificium intellectus* [sacrifice of the intellect] in view of the mysteries of faith, but rather a quasi-experimental procedure of continually renewed testing of the boundary of transcendence” (490).

<sup>29</sup> *The Layman* 63.

Generally speaking then, the creative search for knowledge serves to further our learned ignorance by heightening our sense of dependence upon God, as the creator and sole cause of all that is. Through the activity of discursive reasoning the very limits of reason are themselves apprehended or brought to light and, in the process, our attention is directed away from reason and towards the creative unity of the enfolding intellect that stands as the condition for the possibility of a discursive mode of thought. From the awareness of the disjunctive relation that exists between reason and intellect, we thereby gain an analogical understanding of our disjunctive relation to the divine, an understanding which deepens our faith in God.

Thus, while the art of discursive reasoning may serve important humanistic ideals, through the limitations of reason revealed in the performance of this function, such activity also serves the more important purpose of revealing or illuminating the immeasurable creative unity of mind (which makes such reasoning possible), and further and more importantly, the creative unity of the divine (which makes everything possible), creative conditions which would otherwise remain hidden.<sup>30</sup> Through the comprehensive power and the inevitable inadequacies present in the discursive search for truth, mind is ultimately compelled to turn its attention away from the rational and towards the creative unity which stands as the condition for the possibility of rational knowledge, and ultimately towards the condition for the possibility of existence itself. Thus, for Cusanus, the progressive development of discursive knowledge helps further our humanistic ideals, while at the same time helping to sustain and enhance the power and magnitude of our own self-knowledge, and of our faith in God.

### *Creating the World in the Image of Mind*

Importantly, while the creative unity of intellect cannot be logically or discursively demonstrated, it can be realized performatively, providing a form of demonstration which is exemplary rather than logical. However, if the creative unity of mind is to truly conform to the highest exemplar which is God, then our self-knowledge must itself be continuously exemplified through the temporal pur-

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<sup>30</sup> *The Game of Spheres* 111.



suit of humanistic ideals. Because our creative capacity is expressed within finite, contingent creation, our self-knowledge must undergo a process of continuous renewal through the progressive exercise of our creative capacity, that is, through the progressive exercise of constructive, discursive reason.<sup>31</sup> As Blumenberg has rightly argued, this idea of a continuously self-renewing, progressive pursuit of knowledge is a central point of differentiation between the modern and Scholastic traditions. It represents the rejection of the more static conception of knowledge inherited from the Scholastics, a conception which is essentially "completed in the tradition and needs only to be arranged and defended ever anew."<sup>32</sup> In developing the idea of progressive creation, Cusanus embraces an ideal of knowledge grounded in the open-ended activity of creative freedom.

It is here that the importance of reason and of empirical investigation by way of the senses begins to take on primary significance. As finite creatures we can only talk about what we do not know metaphorically or analogically on the basis of what we do know. For Cusanus, this implies that progress in the perfection of our relationship to the divine must first proceed through a discursive analysis and understanding of ourselves and of the natural order within which we live. Thus, instead of turning our attention away from the created order of things, Cusanus' learned ignorance actually demands that we engage in an intensive, progressive examination and development of both our conjectural understanding and of our material well-being. In Cassirer's rather dramatic phrasing, with Cusanus' positive twist on the negative theological tradition,

The spirit of asceticism is overcome; mistrust of the world disappears. The mind can come to know itself and to measure its own powers only by devoting itself completely and unconditionally to the world. Even sensible nature and sense-knowledge are no longer merely base things, because, in fact, they provide the first impulse and stimulus for all intellectual activity. The mind is the

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<sup>31</sup> Moffitt Watts, *Cusanus* 131.

<sup>32</sup> *Legitimacy* 495.

living illustration of eternal and infinite wisdom; but until it is stimulated to movement by that admiration which arises from contemplation of the sensible, it is, so to speak, asleep within us. This movement, which begins and ends in the mind itself, must pass through the world of the senses.<sup>33</sup>

For Cusanus, this turn towards nature and the material, sensual world as a means of improving our relation to God by way of advancing our learned ignorance plays itself out in an oddly humanistic manner. His view of human nature demands that we exercise our creative capacities, both conceptually and materially, in the reshaping and improvement of our natural condition, for in so doing we actually bring about a greater accord between ourselves and the divine.

Foreshadowing elements found within both Renaissance and Enlightenment humanism, Cusanus argues that one of the primary functions of knowledge is to benefit and improve the general lot of humanity and of our life in this world. The complete realization of our creative capacities demands that we advance our rational understanding while at the same time improving or advancing the social and material conditions within which we live. For Cusanus, part of the very purpose of knowledge is to encourage the progressive development of the material, aesthetic, moral, philosophical and theological conditions necessary for the flourishing of body and soul, and in so doing encourage the greater realization of the divine.

According to Cusanus, our efforts to shape the material world are not limited by the forms or limits found in nature. Instead, we have the power to creatively shape the material world according to forms that are unfolded simply and purely from our minds, forms that can function as ideals, models or exemplars for reshaping nature towards more humanly desirable ends. Using the somewhat mundane example of a spoon, Cusanus shows how human beings are able to create artifacts which have no exemplar in nature, and so are not representations or imitations of natural forms, but are purely human productions. Through our own constructive activity

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<sup>33</sup> *The Individual and the Cosmos* 44–45.

we are thus able to function as the sole cause of these non-natural, materialized forms, allowing us to create and name (make into a universal) that for which no natural, created exemplar already exists. Thus, for Cusanus, both the conceptual sphere of knowing and the material sphere of living (materially, socially and politically) are equally spheres of 'making' or creation. Just as God created us in 'his' image, so too we are able to re-create nature and the world that we know in ours.<sup>34</sup>

While Cusanus lays a great deal of emphasis upon the individual as the original source of reflection and knowledge, he is also careful, in his later works, to emphasize the importance of community in epistemic pursuits. While individual self-reflection may be fundamental to the pursuit of knowledge, the relationship to community is of equal importance for determining the legitimacy and relevance of our knowledge claims.<sup>35</sup> The demand for the general improvement of the human condition manifests itself both conceptually in the search for truth, and naturally in the perfection of our material, social and political conditions. Only by living up to this general demand do we progress towards an idea of human perfectibility that is true to or in accord with the perfection of God. For since our constructive power, which is itself an essential element of our spiritual development, extends equally

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<sup>34</sup> See Moffitt Watts, *Cusanus*: "All human creations are ways of making something out of nothing, either by imposing order upon movements within the mind deriving from external stimuli, as in the case of abstract speculation, or by imposing form upon external material in order to fashion it in the shape of some preconceived idea held in the mind, as in the case of the potter creating dish or pitcher. In all cases, human creativity is the expression of free will and, as such, it transcends the laws of nature which bind the rest of the created universe. Moreover, the arts and sciences of man, and the world of three-dimensional objects that he creates, are all evidences of the continuous process of self-generation and self-perpetuation that distinguishes the human mind. Man is thus not so much a microcosm as a 'microtheus' who, creates and lives in a world whose mentally determined order can and does possess an existence that is basically independent of that of the natural world which is dominated by *fortuna*" (206).

<sup>35</sup> See Moffitt Watts, *Cusanus*: "Through his metaphorical description of the hunt in the *De vernatione sapientiae* and the ball game in *De ludo globi*, Cusanus consistently emphasized that man's creativity is not exercised simply on his own individual behalf and that his thoughts are not conceived in solitude, but rather that both the active and contemplative life are conducted in relationship to the needs and contributions of other men" (231).

well to both our conceptual and material aspects, then the bringing about of a deeper, more meaningful relation to God will inevitably involve the exercise of our creative capacities both at the conceptual and the material levels. Though we are separated from the divine by a radical disjunction, nevertheless it is possible for us to progress towards the perfectibility of our relation to the divine through the exercise of our creative capacity:

So every mind, even ours, though created below all others, has from God that, in the way it can, it is a perfect and living image of the infinite art. Therefore it exists as three and one; it has the power, wisdom and the connection of both in such a way that, as a perfect image of that art, once stimulated it can make itself even more and more like its exemplar. In this way our mind, even if at the start of its creation it does not have the actual reflective brilliance of the creative art in unity and trinity, nonetheless has that power created with it, through which once stimulated it can make itself more like the reality of the divine art. So in the unity of its essence is power, wisdom and will. Master and mastery coincide in (its) essence, as in the living image of the infinite art, which once stimulated can always make itself more conformed to the divine reality without limit, even though the exactness of the infinite art stays always unreachable.<sup>30</sup>

For Cusanus, the purpose behind the search for knowledge is the communication of and participation in the divine art. The path of human perfectibility lies in the pursuit of intellectual, material, social, and political ideals. We can progress in our relation to the divine by actively engaging in the search for ever more comprehensive levels of discursive knowledge, intellectual understanding, and social, political and material well-being, levels which are open to us because already enfolded or implicit within the creative unity which is mind. With Cusanus, in the words of Cassirer, "The Pelagian spirit is reawakened now, that spirit so bitterly fought by Augustine, whose polemics became the basis of medieval religious doc-

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<sup>30</sup> *The Layman* 87.

trine. Cusanus sharply emphasizes the doctrine of man's freedom, for only through freedom can man become God-like; only through freedom can he become the vessel of God."<sup>37</sup>

*Cusanus and the Modern World*

Historically, Cusanus stands somewhere between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, striving on the one hand to preserve the spirit of the Christian tradition, and on the other, to combine the positive contributions of classical and medieval thought with the critical standpoint of the nominalists.<sup>38</sup> In this respect Cusanus' thought represents an important philosophical development of the Christian idea of creation, a development which sets the stage for a complete re-examination, not only of the conditions which govern the promise of knowledge, but of the conditions which underlie the promise of freedom and the nature and purpose of human existence. The importance of Cusanus in this regard, and in his relation to Augustine and Ockham, is aptly summarized by W. Pannenberg:

Augustine ... grounded the truth of knowledge upon the self-certainty of thought. Augustine was not yet aware of the full scope of this act. In order for this to emerge it was still necessary to go through the critical discussions of the Scholastics concerning the process of knowing. In Scholasticism, the dominant position of man became a significant factor for the understanding of the cognitive process as early as the twelfth century. But Ockham still limited himself to analyzing the subjectivity of comprehending thought. He, too, continued to regard the whole cognitive process as something set in motion by sense

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<sup>37</sup> *The Individual and the Cosmos* 43. See also H. Lawrence Bond, "The Journey of the Soul to God in Nicholas of Cusa's *De ludo globi*," *Nicholas of Cusa: In Search of God and Wisdom*, ed. Christianson and Izbicki. For Cusanus, according to Bond, "the soul alone among creation is free to play. This is its condition, the *fortuna* in which it finds itself. That is why its motion, unlike the rest of creation, is journey" (72).

<sup>38</sup> See Miller, "Cusa's *On Conjectures*": "to preserve the transcendence of the medieval image of God Nicholas of Cusa moves forward toward a post-medieval view of human knowing" (140).

impressions. Nicolas of Cusa, in opposition to this, was perhaps the first to understand thought as the creative productivity of the human spirit, independent of sense impressions. He held up mathematical thought as the model of this creative productivity, understanding it no longer as a mere reflective reproduction of ideal relations, but instead as the very creation of the mind itself. Cusa explicitly grounded this conception in man's nature as the image of God. Man is the likeness of the creator of the world precisely in being the creator of an intellectual world of, indeed, an unlimited number of "suppositions" [*Mutmassungen*].<sup>39</sup>

Cusanus' work represents some of the earliest reflections of the modern revolutionary emphasis upon natural objectivity (the sensual), the importance of the individual (the particular), as well as the central role of the creative subject in the question of knowledge. For Cassirer, perhaps the most significant feature of Cusanus' work is that he developed his principal ideas "not in opposition to the religious ideas of the Middle Ages, but from the standpoint of these ideas themselves. His 'discovery of nature and of man' was accomplished from the very heart of religion, where he sought to base and anchor that discovery."<sup>40</sup>

As Cassirer rightly points out, within Cusanus we find some of the earliest seeds of later German idealism, and in particular of the idealist development of the philosophy of nature. This is nowhere more evident than in Cusanus' claim that "The universe is in each individual in such a way that each individual is in it, with the result that in each individual the universe is by contraction what the particular individual is; and every individual in the universe is the universe, though the universe is in each individual in a different way and each thing is in the universe in a different way."<sup>41</sup> There are suggestions of Leibniz here as well and his windowless, mirroring monads. There are also suggestions of Spinoza, though

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<sup>39</sup> "What is Truth?" *Basic Questions in Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1970-73) 2: 14-15.

<sup>40</sup> *The Individual and the Cosmos* 36.

<sup>41</sup> *Of Learned Ignorance*, trans. Germain Heron (London: Routledge, 1954) 84.

perhaps less explicitly so. In what appears to be the clear foreshadowing of such key figures as Schelling and Hegel, Cusanus also claims that the mind's search for knowledge is ultimately a search for itself:

The mind itself, supposing itself to encompass, survey, and comprehend all things, thus concludes that it is in everything and everything is in it, so that it affirms that nothing can be outside itself and escape its observation. Accordingly, it observes in the numerical likeness elicited from itself, that is, in its natural and proper image, its own unity, which is its being.<sup>42</sup>

According to Cusanus, it is only by discovering how mind is present in nature, and nature in mind, that we develop a more progressive understanding of ourselves, and subsequently a more perfect realization of our true relation to the divine. Cusanus' claim is a direct result of his extending the divine power of creation to human nature, an idea that is taken up in later writers in a less explicitly Christian manner, but which remains, nonetheless, Christian in character.

Cusanus' emphasis upon mind as the creative ground or source of its knowing represents a significant movement in the direction of Descartes and the primacy of the subject's own self-knowledge as the condition or ground of certainty. Cusanus' emphasis upon mathematics as the primary model of certainty and of knowledge in general, serving as the original framework for all forms of knowing (including the knowledge of nature), also stands as a significant development towards the general mathematization of nature that we find in Descartes and Galileo, as well as the creative account of mathematics found in the work of Kant. Following in the spirit of Cusanus, Kant too will place the creative, spontaneous activity of mind or the subject as the condition for the possibility of mathematics and of knowledge in general. Undertaking a systematic analysis of mind, Kant, like Cusanus, will also show how the limits of discursive reasoning (i.e., theoretical or

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<sup>42</sup> *De Coniecturis*, quoted in Moffitt Watts, *Cusanus* 98.

scientific understanding) point towards freedom or the spontaneous power of construction as its ground, making room both for the higher spheres of moral action and of 'faith'. Again what we see here is the development of ideas that are strongly suggestive of the medieval vision of human being as creative being as illustrated in Cusanus.

Exactly how direct these medieval, Christian ideas may have been in helping to shape the development of these more modern ways of viewing is difficult to show. Nevertheless, I would argue that the growing awareness of the importance of creative freedom as expressed by Cusanus is clearly evident in the growing belief, common throughout much of the Renaissance and made ever more explicit by the seventeenth century, in the need for humanity to take a more active role in nature. Nature begins to be seen as something which, because unfinished, allows for the possibility of human intervention and improvement. Not only is nature unfinished (as the discovery of the New World would have made painfully clear), but there is a growing belief throughout this period that it was created that way by God for human purposes. As that which is essentially incomplete, nature is seen more and more as the arena for the exercise of human creativity and will in the construction of the world in our image.

This new *ergetic* ideal is expressed in the general belief that it is within humanity's power to build a new political, social, and philosophical world, a world grounded in creative freedom. There is a growing belief in the possibility of progress of various sorts, in ideas which Clarence J. Glacken claims "were associated with a belief that man with tools and knowledge was improving the earth as surely as he was improving himself."<sup>43</sup> Such self-confidence rests largely upon humanity's belief that it can creatively raise itself up from its present state by its own bootstraps as it were and thus save itself by employing the creative freedom given to us by God. Other pressures—political and social conflicts, religious tension, economic developments, voyages of discovery, inventions, and environmental degradation—were no doubt crucial in helping give rise to this

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<sup>43</sup> *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990) 495.



modern, energetic confidence. However, none of these pressures in themselves or in chorus seems adequate to explain the particular character of the period that follows. After all, social and economic conflicts are hardly new. Neither is religious tension. The economic conditions of the time don't seem to be radically different from other periods of history. There have been as many 'voyages of discovery' (one need only mention the Vikings) as there have been potentially revolutionary inventions. And many great civilizations, such as the Incas, seem to have fallen under the weight of environmental degradation. In the end, I would argue, it is a firm belief in the creative power of the human will, a capacity for creativity made philosophically and culturally intelligible through Christian belief, that plays a decisive role in this development. It is from this profound belief in human creativity combined with these other pressures that the modern confidence finally emerges. The work of Nicholas of Cusa stands as one of the clearest expressions of this newly developing point of view.