

Eugen Russo

**PHILOSOPHY OF PARADOX IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY:  
NICOLAUS CUSANUS' *DE DOCTA IGNORANTIA* AND MASACCIO'S  
*TRINITY***

MA Thesis in Medieval Studies

Central European University

Budapest

September 2014

**PHILOSOPHY OF PARADOX IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY: NICOLAUS  
CUSANUS' *DE DOCTA IGNORANTIA* AND MASACCIO'S *TRINITY***

By  
Eugen Russo  
(Romania)

Thesis submitted to the Department of Medieval Studies,  
Central European University, Budapest, in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
of the Master of Arts degree in Medieval Studies.

Accepted in conformance with the standards of the CEU.

---

Chair, Examination Committee

---

Thesis Supervisor

---

Examiner

---

Examiner

Budapest  
September 2014

**PHILOSOPHY OF PARADOX IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY: NICOLAUS  
CUSANUS' *DE DOCTA IGNORANTIA* AND MASACCIO'S *TRINITY***

By

Eugen Russo

(Romania)

Thesis submitted to the Department of Medieval Studies,  
Central European University, Budapest, in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
of the Master of Arts degree in Medieval Studies.

Accepted in conformance with the standards of the CEU.

---

External Reader

**PHILOSOPHY OF PARADOX IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY: NICOLAUS  
CUSANUS' *DE DOCTA IGNORANTIA* AND MASACCIO'S *TRINITY***

By

Eugen Russo

(Romania)

Thesis submitted to the Department of Medieval Studies,  
Central European University, Budapest, in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
of the Master of Arts degree in Medieval Studies.

Accepted in conformance with the standards of the CEU.

---

External Supervisor

Budapest  
September 2014

I, the undersigned, **Eugen Russo**, candidate for the MA degree in Medieval Studies, declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Budapest, 25 August 2014

---

Signature

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. Gyorgy Gereby, for his invaluable help, encouragement and patient support through this great endeavor. Judith Rasson deserves great thanks for her support and help with proofreading. I would also like to thank Professors Aziz Al-Azmeh, Gabor Klaniczay, Jozsef Laszlovsy, Istvan Perczel, Marianne Saghy, Bela Zsolt Szakacz, Gyorgy Szonyi, and Daniel Ziemann, who in their very different ways challenged me and made me think, and made the thoughts developed here possible. Prof. Cristian Gaspar deserves special thanks for helping me develop my Latin. I am grateful to the Medieval Studies department for offering me this opportunity and the resources necessary to complete this research. Most of all, thanks to my dear Ieva for reasons only she knows.

## ABSTRACT

Nicolaus Cusanus, canon lawyer, Catholic cardinal, and arguably the most innovative philosopher-theologian of the fifteenth century, remains a puzzling intellectual figure with his paradox-centered philosophical works which, after a century of focused scholarly attention, still divide commentators on the issue of how to place them in the intellectual context of his time. Given the closely-knit intellectual-artistic milieu of early Renaissance Italy, to which Cusanus has strong connections, scholars have recently taken up the task of connecting Cusanus' thought with ideas expressed in contemporary Renaissance artworks. This thesis develops an argument for such a connection, focusing on Masaccio's 1427/28 fresco *The Trinity*, itself most likely a collaborative work between an innovative artist (Masaccio), a painter and trained theologian (Alessio Strozzi) and an educated humanist and artist (Brunelleschi).

First, Cusanus' philosophical method in *De Docta Ignorantia* and contemporary writings is examined and a novel formulation of it is proposed, able to reconcile the seemingly contradictory features of this complex treatise by the systematization of multiple levels of paradox building upon each other. Then, the artistic technique of linear perspective, newly-invented at the time, is investigated and found to provide the crucial intellectual link, as uniquely suited for representing a systematic progression through levels of paradox. Finally, Masaccio's *Trinity* is examined and the features of its systematic, perspectively informed treatment of its subject matter (the same as Cusanus' own subject: the doctrines of the Christian tradition) are investigated. The artwork and Cusanus' treatise are found to have in common a fundamental paradox-centered method for systematizing the contents of the tradition, which places them both within a well established Christian tradition of thought about paradox. In accordance with recent developments in the literature, this is proposed as a solution to the long-standing issue of placing Cusanus within his intellectual context.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	III
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS .....	IV
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 1. NICOLAUS CUSANUS' PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD IN <i>DE DOCTA IGNORANTIA</i> (1437-1440) .....	11
1. The historical context.....	11
2. Cusanus' method.....	15
2.1. S1 – Order: ordinary, non-paradoxical language and knowledge.....	27
2.2. S2 – Paradox: the coincidence of opposites .....	30
2.3. S3 – Order: God beyond <i>coincidentia oppositorum</i> ; cosmic order.....	32
2.3.1. --- ‘Traditional metaphysics’ and the paradigmatic question of God’s existence ..	33
2.3.2. --- Paradoxically positive relations .....	37
2.3.3. --- The issue of God’s Trinity .....	40
2.3.4. --- Corollaries to S3 .....	43
2.4. S4 – Paradox: the Incarnation in Christ .....	44
2.4.1. --- Human nature as a microcosm.....	44
2.4.2. --- The image of inscribed polygon and circle revisited .....	46
2.5. S5 – Order: The Church .....	47
2.6. S6 – Paradox: The Resurrection.....	48
2.7. S7 – Order: the Church Triumphant in the afterlife .....	49
2.8. S8 – Paradox: Infinite God.....	50
2.9. S9 – The Blessed in an ever-new relation to God’s infinity .....	50
2.10. Sn, Sn+1 – for ‘n’ progressing to infinity .....	51
3. Corollaries.....	51
CHAPTER 2. PERSPECTIVE AS A METHOD FOR THE SYSTEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF PARADOX.....	54
CHAPTER 3. PARADOX IN MASACCIO’S <i>TRINITY</i> (C.1427)—A PARALLEL WITH <i>DE DOCTA IGNORANTIA</i> .....	67
1. The work and its historical context.....	67
1.1. When did Cusanus see the <i>Trinity</i> ? .....	72
2. The method .....	74
2.1. S1 – Order: the immediate visible level and perspective effect .....	75
2.2. S2 – Paradox: the vanishing point .....	76
2.3. S3 – Order: cosmic order.....	77
2.4. S4 – Paradox: an “Incarnation” of the triune God.....	77
2.5. S5 – Order: The Church Militant – the perspectival chapel space and donors .....	80



2.6. S6 – Paradox: Christ’s Judgment – death and the message on the tomb.....	82
2.7. S7 – Order: The Church Triumphant – the saints.....	83
2.8. S8-S9 – Paradox-Order: Partaking of the inexhaustibly infinite God .....	84
2.9. Sn-Sn+1 – The recurring pattern .....	84
3. Corollaries.....	84
CONCLUSIONS.....	86
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	89

## LIST OF FIGURES

- p. 56      Fig. 1. Jan Vredeman de Vries, *Perspective* (1604-5; reprint, New York: Dover Books, 1968), plate 28.
- p. 69      Fig. 2. Masaccio, *The Trinity* (1427/8), Santa Maria Novella, Florence (in John T. Spike, *Masaccio* (Milano: Rizzolo Libri Illustrati, 2002). Licensed under Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons – [www.commonswikimedia.org/wiki](http://www.commonswikimedia.org/wiki))
- p. 81      Fig. 3. Masaccio's Trinity—reconstruction of the plan and elevation. Sanpaolesi, Piero, *Brunelleschi* (Milan: Edizioni per il Club del Libro, 1962), fig. C, opp. p. 52.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>DDI</i>	<i>De Docta Ignorantia.</i>
<i>ADI</i>	<i>Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae</i>
<i>DC</i>	<i>De Conjecturis.</i>
<i>DCC</i>	<i>De Concordantia Catholica.</i>

## INTRODUCTION

Nicolaus Cusanus<sup>1</sup> (1401-1464), German philosopher-theologian, mathematician, jurist, diplomat, and cardinal of the Catholic Church, has been the object of increasingly significant scholarly attention through the last century<sup>2</sup>. A cosmopolite who travelled extensively through Europe, first for his studies (educated at Heidelberg and Padua) and later as part of his diplomatic duties in the service of the pope, he left behind philosophical works which present an enduring puzzle for intellectual history: namely, the problem of where to place his thought in the context of his time and the Western tradition generally. To state the problem succinctly, in early-to-mid fifteenth-century Western Europe the intellectual landscape can be broadly divided between scholastics (themselves divided into different schools and currents, e.g., those following the *via antiqua* and the *via moderna*, which for the most part maps onto the division between ‘realism’ and ‘nominalism’, etc.<sup>3</sup>) and humanists. Cusanus, although showing intriguing influences from both intellectual traditions, does not fit in either one, as his philosophy in both method and scope seems radically different from contemporary works of either tradition<sup>4</sup>. Further, although the label ‘Neoplatonic’ is often applied to him, his works seem to differ radically from those of the major fifteenth-century

---

<sup>1</sup> This is his Latinized name, and the one I will use most often; he is known in most German literature as ‘Nikolaus von Kues’ and in English as ‘Nicholas of Cusa’, after his hometown, nowadays Bernkastel-Kues. His birth name is *Nicolaus Cances*—in German *Krebs*, in his native Moselle Franconian German dialect spelled variously Cryfftz, Kriefftz, Kreves. He only used his family name to refer to himself before 1430. The earliest attestation of ‘Cusanus’ is in 1440; before that time he was referred to in Italian humanist circles as Nicolaus Treverensis. See Eric Meuthen, *Nicholas of Cusa: A Sketch for a Biography*, tr. David Crowner and Gerald Cristinanson (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>2</sup> On the development of scholarship on Cusanus through the last century, see, e.g., Morimichi Watanabe, “An Appreciation”, in Christopher M. Bellitto, Thomas M. Izbicki, Gerald Christianson, *Introducing Nicholas of Cusa: A Guide to a Renaissance Man* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 3-19; also, idem., “The Origins of Modern Cusanus Research in Germany and the Establishment of the Heidelberg *Opera Omnia*,” in *Concord and Reform: Nicholas of Cusa and Legal and Political Thought in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Morimichi Watanabe (Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2001), 35-60.

<sup>3</sup> For a genetic account of the variety of these different approaches and schools, often influenced by geography or clustering around the legacy of one or more significant thinkers, see Gordon Leff, *The Dissolution of the Medieval Outlook: an Essay on Intellectual and Spiritual Change in the Fourteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., M. Siedlmayer, “Nikolaus von Kues und der Humanismus,” in *Humanismus, Mystic und Kunst in der Welt des Mittelalters*, ed. J. Koch (Leiden: Brill, 1953), 1–38.

Neoplatonic thinkers<sup>5</sup>. As to his impact and influence, although he maintained friendships with prominent intellectual figures of his time and was part of some of the most important intellectual circles<sup>6</sup>, his works seem to have had little impact on his intellectual contemporaries and he left behind no ‘school’ or circle of disciples<sup>7</sup>. How to best place Cusanus’ thought within the context of his time thus remains a question in search of a widely-accepted answer<sup>8</sup>.

The closely related problem of Cusanus’ ‘modernity’, i.e., whether he can be described as a ‘medieval’ or ‘modern’ thinker has sharply divided scholars (the latter position, prevalent in the early twentieth century, contributed greatly to developing modern interest in, and scholarship on, his thought). The ongoing debate<sup>9</sup> has featured scholars arguing for more or less all possible positions: e.g., Nicholas being called ‘the first modern

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Pauline Moffit-Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus: A Fifteenth-Century Vision of Man* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 12. For an in-depth account of the differences between Cusanus and contemporary Platonists, see E. Garin, “Niccolò Cusano e i platonici italiani del Quattrocento,” in *Niccolò da Cusa. Relazioni tenute al convegno interuniversitario di Bressanone nel 1960* (Florence: Sansoni, 1962) 75–100, where Garin argues that Cusanus was an ‘isolated’ thinker (p.86).

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Paolo Toscanelli, Lorenzo Valla – see Moffit-Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus*, 20. For a useful general account of the intellectual system of connections centered around Florence and Rome in the early fifteenth century, see Tom Mueller’s article “Der ‘Florentiner Stammtisch’, eine frühe ‘Akademie’ der Wissenschaften und der Künste,” in *Das europäische Erbe im Denken des Nikolaus von Kues: Geistesgeschichte als Geistesgegenwart*, ed. Harald Schwaetzer (Muenster: Aschendorff, 2008), 89–128. Mueller describes the network of such informal connections as a *Stammtisch* – approximately translated, a ‘regulars’ table’.

<sup>7</sup> Moffit-Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus*, 11. Later significant influences can be traced more easily: Giordano Bruno, Georg Cantor. On the latter, and the great impact that Cusanus’ notions of infinity had on the development of modern mathematics, see Wolfgang Achtner, “Infinity in Science and Religion”, *Neue Zeitschrift fuer Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 47 (2005): 392–411, esp. 405ff.

<sup>8</sup> Cesare Cata, “*Perspicere Deum*: Nicholas of Cusa and the European Art of the Fifteenth Century,” *Viator* 39, no. 1 (2008): 285–305, p. 285. One of the most interesting and novel attempts to categorize Cusanus’ thought in current scholarship is the one by David Albertson in his *Mathematical Theologies: Nicholas of Cusa and the Legacy of Thierry of Chartres* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), where he attempts to place Cusanus as following Thierry of Chartres within a ‘Neopythagorean’ tradition, focusing on the extraordinary role of number and mathematical objects and illustrations in Cusanus’ system. Albertson’s analysis is cogent, and Cusanus’ debt to Thierry of Chartres must be acknowledged; however, Cusanus’ pronouncements on the cosmic and metaphysical significance of number (just as his various defenses of Platonic, Aristotelian and Christian tenets) cannot be understood without the framework of systematically-developed paradox in which they are made and which is their methodological presupposition. This framework is what I investigate in Chapter 1.

<sup>9</sup> For the most recent contributions to the modernity debate, see Tom Mueller and Matthias Vollet, ed., *Die Modernitäten des Nikolaus von Kues: Debatten und Rezeptionen* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2013). An older influential article is Jasper Hopkins, “Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464): First Modern Philosopher?” in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, XXVI: Renaissance and Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. A. French, H.K. Wettstein (Boston: Blackwell, 2002) 13–29, with a review of the more prominent positions. Hopkins is skeptical of all claims as to Cusanus’ ‘modernity’. For a reply to Hopkins’ article and a furthering of the discussion, see Arne Moritz, “Was kann Cusanus dafuer, dass wir ihn modern interpretieren?,” in Mueller, Vollet, ed., *Die Modernitäten*, 467–485.

philosopher'<sup>10</sup> or a fundamentally medieval figure<sup>11</sup>, or someone with 'one foot in the medieval world, one foot in the modern world'<sup>12</sup>; or, indeed, a figure that shows the problematic nature of binary categories such as 'medieval' and 'modern'<sup>13</sup>. The crucial issue underlying these widespread scholarly disagreements seems to be how to interpret Cusanus' philosophical thought, and in particular the relationship between his thought and the Western Christian tradition. It has been remarked that Cusanus has been associated by scholars with 'almost all possible philosophical systems'<sup>14</sup>; and the debate concerning the relationship in his works between philosophy and tenets of the Catholic tradition, a debate usually put in terms of the relationship between 'faith' and 'reason', seems to yield similarly contradictory opinions among scholars as the 'modern-medieval' dichotomy<sup>15</sup>. Cusanus thus presents the intellectual history researcher with puzzles that point to the necessity of new methods and approaches to develop a proper understanding of his thought in context.

In search of ways to achieve this goal, scholars have recently built on the argument that Renaissance art and thought stand in a particularly close mutual relationship, and have taken up efforts to identify intellectual-artistic common ground that would better connect Cusanus to the cultural context of the Renaissance, investigating the relationships between Cusanus' thought and the artistic developments of the period. I do not undertake a thorough

<sup>10</sup> Most influentially by Ernst Cassirer, who, in his *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1927), calls him "*de[r] erst[e] modern[e] Denker*" – p.10.

<sup>11</sup> According to Hopkins in "Nicholas of Cusa: First Modern Philosopher?" Cusanus is, at most, a 'door opener' (*Tueroffnen*) to modernity without himself crossing the threshold– p.29. Rudolf Haubst is another prominent scholar who interprets Cusanus' thought as being in fundamental continuity with medieval scholasticism; see, e.g., his essay "Theologie in der Philosophie—Philosophie in der Theologie des Nikolaus von Kues," in *Streifzuege in die Cusanische Theologie* (Muenster: Aschendorff, 1991), 43-77.

<sup>12</sup> E.g. Copleston: "[Cusanus] 'has one foot so to speak in both the medieval and post-medieval world'". F. Copleston, *Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 157-58.

<sup>13</sup> Karen Hudson remarks on this in her *Becoming God: The Doctrine of Theosis in Nicholas of Cusa* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 32. Her proposal is that this issue might be resolved by "aligning [Cusanus] with the Eastern Church in which such a rupture never occurred" (p. 14).

<sup>14</sup> Haubst, *Streifzuege*, 21-22 – "fast alle moegliche Systemen: ... Agnostizismus, Idealismus, Pantheismus".

<sup>15</sup> See Karen Ziebart, *Nicolaus Cusanus on Faith and the Intellect: A Case Study in 15<sup>th</sup> Century fides-ratio Controversy* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 6. She provides a thorough review of the contemporary status of the debate on pp. 15-26.

defense of this approach here—this has been done in the existing scholarship<sup>16</sup>. This approach has proven promising and fruitful in practice and has guided the development of a growing field of research<sup>17</sup> in which the focus has mostly been placed so far on relating Cusanus' thought to two prominent artists of the 'Northern Renaissance' – Jan van Eyck<sup>18</sup> and Albrecht Dürer<sup>19</sup>. In this thesis I will pursue an enquiry broadly within the boundaries of these established scholarly precedents, taking as my object Masaccio's fresco commonly referred to as the *Trinity* (c.1427, Florence, Santa Maria Novella).

It must be emphasized that my aim will not be to establish any causal relationship, or theory of influence, between the image and Cusanus' works. This is in line with the studies cited which investigate Cusanus's thought and artworks, and which freely admit that there is no direct evidence of such a causal connection, i.e. that the painters ever read Cusanus' works or that Cusanus saw their works. In my case, the fresco predates Cusanus' work that I am focusing on, *De Docta Ignorantia* (finished 1440), by some 12 years. Although I will argue with a good degree of probability that he probably saw it for the first time in Florence very close to the date at which he started working on *De Docta Ignorantia*, there is not enough evidence to establish any sort of direct influence. My aim will be rather to investigate what I will call a philosophy (and theology) of paradox, which stands as the defining trait of Cusanus' system, and which, I will argue, can be found in its essentials in the peculiarities of

---

<sup>16</sup> For a general defense of this, see Inigo Bocken and Tilman Borsche, ed., *Kann das Denken malen? Philosophie und Malerei in der Renaissance* (Munich: Paderborn, 2010), especially Inigo Bocken's article "Sehen und gesehen werden. Unendlichkeit und Sinnlichkeit im 15. Jahrhundert," pp. 95-110; also, Tom Mueller, "Der 'Florentiner Stammtisch'". For a comprehensive account of Cusanus' manifold connections with, and influences on, contemporary artists, focusing on Cusanus' aesthetic theory, see Giovanni Santinello, *Il Pensiero di Nicolo Cusanu Nella Sua Prospettiva Estetica* (Padua: Liviana, 1958), esp. pp. 151-5, 229-31, 263-72.

<sup>17</sup> Matthias Vollet writes in his "Introduction" to Mueller and Vollet, ed., *Die Modernitaeten* (2013) that this area of research is 'still too little addressed' ('noch zu wenig bearbeitet') in the scholarship (p. 16).

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Clifton Olds, "Aspect and Perspective in Renaissance Thought: Nicholas of Cusa and Jan van Eyck," in *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church: Essays in Memory of Chandler McCusky Brooks*, ed. Gerald Christianson, Thomas Izbicki (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 251-264; or Wolfgang Christian Schneider, "Das cusanische Denken im Malen Jan van Eycks," in Mueller and Vollet, ed., *Die Modernitaeten*, 215-251.

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Elena Filippi, "'Quasi pictor, qui diversos temperat colores, ut habeat sui ipsius imaginem.' Zu Cusanus und Dürer," in *Das europäische Erbe im Denken des Nikolaus von Kues: Geistesgeschichte als*

Masaccio's theological program in the fresco. This contention is not made implausible by Masaccio's lack of any known education or training in theology or philosophy—recent scholarship has established the strong likelihood that Masaccio was helped in the planning and possibly execution of the fresco by Filippo Brunelleschi (architect, polymath, of humanistic education) and Fra Alessio Strozzi (Dominican, painter, trained theologian). The *Trinity* thus is most likely a theologically-informed collaborative work and a worthwhile object for philosophical scrutiny and plausible comparison with Cusanus' arguments in his theoretical works.

No such investigation focused on a work by Masaccio has been undertaken in the scholarship so far; but the possibility has been convincingly, though briefly, argued. Cesare Cata, in his 2008 article: "*Perspicere Deum*: Nicholas of Cusa and the European Art of the Fifteenth Century,"<sup>20</sup> has undertaken a broad general sketch of such a possible investigation of Cusanus' thought in relation to contemporary artists and artworks, particularly of the Italian Renaissance, an area that has received comparatively less attention in connection with Cusanus so far. Masaccio is one of the artists Cata mentions, and the *Trinity* is one of his works singled out as showing promise for such an investigation<sup>21</sup>. Cata's brief and general suggestions thus provide one of the points of inspiration for my investigation in this thesis.

Another crucial source and point of inspiration is Karen Hudson's excellent 2007 study on the theme of *theosis* ('deification', 'becoming God') in Cusanus' thought<sup>22</sup>, treating his philosophy in relation to the themes and emphases of Eastern Christian theology. Her work, informed by a study of Eastern patristic authors, gives an account of Cusanus' thought

---

*Geistesgegenwart*, ed. Harald Schwätzer (Muenster: Aschendorff, 2008), 175-199; idem, "Albrecht Duerers *docta manus* und ihre cusanische Herkunft," in Mueller and Vollet, ed., *Die Modernitaeten*, 251-267.

<sup>20</sup> Cesare Cata, *Perspicere Deum*, 285-305.

<sup>21</sup> Cata, *Perspicere Deum*, 294-295. His treatment of Masaccio's *Trinity* amounts to one paragraph, in which only the most obvious relevant feature of the fresco (the perspectively anomalous figure of God the Father) is touched on; nonetheless, his remarks point to the necessity of a focused and in-depth study, as I have undertaken in Chapter III.

<sup>22</sup> Karen Hudson, *Becoming God: The Doctrine of Theosis in Nicholas of Cusa* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007).



as organized around the implicit theme, prominent particularly in the Eastern tradition, of ‘becoming God’—the unending process of progress into a paradoxical union with God (Himself paradoxically conceived) that is put forward as the highest goal for human beings<sup>23</sup>. Cusanus is peculiar in the context of the Western tradition by his use of paradox as an integral part of his philosophical method, not as a form of ‘error’ or something to be avoided but as a means of achieving knowledge about God and an indispensable means to *theologia mystica*<sup>24</sup>, which Hudson describes as essentially the same in goal and presuppositions as the Eastern approach to ‘mystical theology’<sup>25</sup>. The underlying presupposition, made explicit by Cusanus in his works in the form of the recurring motif of *coincidentia oppositorum*, the ‘coincidence of opposites’ (i.e. simultaneous presence of contradictory predicates), is of a philosophical method that goes beyond the limitations of the ‘law of non-contradiction’ of Aristotelian authority<sup>26</sup>. Thus understood, paradox, together with the notion of infinite progress, are put forth by Hudson as the central element in Cusanus’ thought<sup>27</sup>.

At the same time, Cata, in the mentioned article, also focuses on Cusanus’ thought as dealing with the problem of infinity as a paradoxical concept, which thus can function in

---

<sup>23</sup> This crucial theme, of a ‘union’ with God conceived paradoxically, can be found throughout the Eastern Christian tradition. Beside Gregory of Nazianzen, Maximus the Confessor, and Pseudo-Dionysus, whose work Hudson examines, the theme can also be found prominently in the writings of Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), one of the major influential theologians of the Eastern tradition. See, e.g., *Triads*. For an account of Eastern Christian theology centered on the notion of such a paradoxical mystical union, see V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997). For an account of the development of the Christian tradition centered on it preserving the elements of paradox, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 5 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973-1990), esp. vol. I, pp. 127, 131-132 *et passim*.

<sup>24</sup> *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* 7: ...cum nunc Aristotelica secta praevaleat, quae haeresim putat esse oppositorum coincidentiam, in cuius admissione est initium ascensus in mysticam theologiam.

<sup>25</sup> Hudson, *Becoming God*, 12.

<sup>26</sup> This is interestingly related to recent developments by contemporary logicians working on non-classical logic. Thus, for instance, Graham Priest, one of the most prominent advocates for such an approach, singles out Cusanus as one of the few figures in the Western tradition who attempted to go beyond the ‘law of non-contradiction’—*Beyond the Limits of Thought*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 23-24. Yet Priest’s account of Cusanus is short, simplified, and reductive. I aim to show with my account of Cusanus’ method that he developed his thought on the issue of paradox to a much higher level than Priest is willing to grant him, and that as a result Cusanus’ philosophical method is worthy of much more in-depth attention in this and other contemporary debates.

For an examination of the relationship between Cusanus’ thought and contemporary developments in non-classical logic, see Marko Ursic, “Paraconsistency and dialectics as *coincidentia oppositorum* in the philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa,” in *Logique & Analyse* 41 (1998): 203-217.

crucial ways as a ‘name’ for God. Masaccio’s *Trinity* is mentioned as providing an illustration of two elements prominent in Cusanus’ thought: an ordered, ‘measured’ universe through Masaccio’s use of linear perspective, together with the paradox of God’s revelation and presence in the perspectival anomaly of the depicted figure of God. Linear perspective, an innovation characteristic of Renaissance art, of which Masaccio’s *Trinity* is the first large-scale example<sup>28</sup>, is a mode of representation which is able to create the impression of a three-dimensional scene by means of geometrical construction. Objects depicted appear to diminish in size the further they are from the viewer, and parallel straight lines perpendicular to the plane of the image all converge towards one ‘vanishing point’.<sup>29</sup> Along with an ordered, geometrically structured view of the scene depicted, this makes possible the depiction of explicit ‘anomalies’ within that order: in effect, visual paradoxes. Thus, the use of perspective in the *Trinity* fresco, as both providing an order of the depicted finite and pointing at its own limitations by making possible the visual construction of paradox, is cited by Cata as the main feature which allows a fruitful link to Cusanus’ thought<sup>30</sup>.

The connection between Cusanus’ thought and Masaccio’s fresco thus hinges on two elements: Cusanus’ philosophical method in its use of paradox and the meaning of perspective as a method of representation which allows paradox to be ‘represented’. I deal with these two elements in turn. In Chapter 1 I develop a novel account of Cusanus’ philosophical method in *De Docta Ignorantia*, integrating recent scholarship (e.g., Hudson’s book) with previous attempts by scholars both in the English and German-speaking traditions

---

<sup>27</sup> Hudson, *Becoming God*, 9-10.

<sup>28</sup> Hugh Hudson, “The Monuments of Florence, Real and Imagined, in the Early Renaissance: The Development of Single-Point Perspective in Painting,” *PLACE* (April 2007), [www.carnesecchi.eu/Hugh\\_Hudson1.pdf](http://www.carnesecchi.eu/Hugh_Hudson1.pdf) (last accessed 28.07.2014): 1-13, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> In the literature, linear perspective has usually been defined as a ‘looking through’ the artwork as if it were a ‘window’ to (the illusion of) a three-dimensional scene behind it, after the etymology of ‘*per-spectiva*’ and. This is indeed the most striking immediate aspect of perspective; however, defining it in such terms, i.e., as an attempt at ‘illusion’, unduly burdens our ability to make sense of, e.g., clearly intentional uses of ‘illusion-breaking’ perspectival anomalies, such as in the case of Masaccio’s *Trinity*. I will develop this argument further in Chapter II. See, e.g., Hudson, “The Monuments of Florence,” or Cata, “*Perspicere Deum*,” for a different account of perspective similar to that which I am using.

to give a unified account of Cusanus' thought. I will establish that Cusanus is employing what can fittingly be called a 'philosophy of paradox'. In Chapter 2 I develop a simple account of linear perspective and its interpretation, avoiding a number of large, contentious issues in the large existing bibliography (such as whether perspective truly represents the way we 'really see', etc.), and aiming to establish, by means of a foundation as non-contentious as possible, a method for interpreting a perspectival artwork as able to represent and 'convey' paradox between a reflective artist and a reflective viewer. I will use for this purpose some of the most important scholarship on perspective as a philosophical device<sup>31</sup>. In Chapter 3 I examine Masaccio's *Trinity* in its historical and art-historical context and develop, using the insights of Chapter 2, an interpretive method applied to the fresco and to observations made and supported by art historians working on its most significant, and likely meaningful, features; thus examined, the fresco will yield evidence of the systematic planning of a paradox-focused theological agenda, strikingly similar to Cusanus' own paradox-focused arguments.

For my account of Cusanus' thought, I will limit myself to *De Docta Ignorantia* and his smaller works circa 1437-1440 (i.e., his sermons XIX-XXII). This requires justification. Although *DDI* is by far the best known of Cusanus' works and commonly described in the literature as his first major speculative treatise in which he develops his novel philosophical method, the later *De Visione Dei* (1453) is more often taken up in investigations of artworks in relation to Cusanus' thought<sup>32</sup>, and might initially seem to be a better choice for a starting point, as it starts from and returns to the image of a painting, and takes up *visio* as its main theme. However, a unified account of Cusanus' method is essential for a proper development

---

<sup>30</sup> Cata, "*Perspicere Deum*," 295.

<sup>31</sup> E.g., Erwin Panofski, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996); Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001); Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*, tr. Janet Lloyd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); for a recent treatment of the issue, see Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity With Nicholas of Cusa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

of my argument, which is a problem that needs to be treated topically, as there does not seem to be a general consensus on the subject in the literature<sup>33</sup>. *De Docta Ignorantia* thus comes into view as the necessary starting point of such an investigation; and, constrained by that necessity and the limits of space, I must forego treating Cusanus' later works topically, together with the contentious issue of whether there is any fundamental shift in his method between writing *De Docta Ignorantia* and his next major work, *De Conjecturis* (1442-43)<sup>34</sup>. As to Cusanus' earlier works, most scholars agree that *De Docta Ignorantia* marks a radical shift in his thought on precisely the issues of method relevant to my account<sup>35</sup>. I will thus develop my argument based on *De Docta Ignorantia* and his sermons of 1437-1440, avoiding major overarching claims about Cusanus' thought generally, as outside the purview of my topic here. For the sake of brevity, I will use general terms such as 'Cusanus' method' or 'thought' without qualification; their proper meaning should be understood as restricted to the time period mentioned, while the application of these results to his later writing remains speculative, and the object of much needed future research.

In conclusion, I will argue that the two works considered, Cusanus' *De Docta Ignorantia* and Masaccios' *Trinity*, have fundamental structural and thematic similarities that originated in the common cultural context in which they were created, and, further, from the broader Christian tradition with which both works topically engage. Both are large-scale

---

<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., Clifton Olds, "Aspect and Perspective," or Wolfgang Schneider, "Das cusanische Denken."

<sup>33</sup> This is an issue fundamentally linked with the disagreements about how to place Cusanus within his intellectual context; see notes 2-8 above.

<sup>34</sup> Koch, for instance, argues for such a shift, which Moffit-Watts calls a 'quantum leap' – *Nicolaus Cusanus*, p. 26. For the division of Cusanus' thought into chronological periods, see Kurt Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues: Geschichte Einer Entwicklung: Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Cusanische Philosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2008), 42-44.

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Peter J. Casarella, "Introduction", in *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*, ed. Peter J. Casarella (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), xxv; Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues*, 42-43, 92-94. On Cusanus' thought before the completion of *De Docta Ignorantia*, the standard work is H. G. Senger, *Die Philosophie des Nikolaus von Kues vor dem Jahre 1440. Untersuchungen zur Entwicklung einer Philosophie in der Frühzeit des Nikolaus (1430-1440)* (Muenster: Aschendorff, 1971). See also Moffit-Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus*, p.32 and note 4 on p.35 for further commentators arguing for a break between Cusanus' pre-DDI and post-DDI thought.

applications of radically novel methods of representation<sup>36</sup> (in the case of Cusanus, his paradox-centered philosophical method and in the case of Masaccio, linear perspective) to the core paradoxical content of the Christian tradition: the dogmas of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Further, these methods are fundamentally similar and involve systematization of paradox; they effectively come together with the issue of applying geometry to the question of representing the paradoxical God. Both Cusanus' *De Docta Ignorantia* and Masaccio's fresco can thus be said to represent philosophies (and theologies) of paradox. Beyond this, other artworks, as, e.g., Cata suggests in his article, could also arguably fit within such a paradox-focused tradition<sup>37</sup>. In this way, Cusanus might be better seen (together with Masaccio) not as an extraordinary isolated exception to his context but rather as a thinker who fits within a context that is, in heretofore unacknowledged ways, richer than historians, until recently, have tended to assume.

---

<sup>36</sup> Two meanings of 'representation' are here simultaneously in play: the verbal (from which comes, e.g., 'misrepresenting someone's words') and the pictorial.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Moffit-Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus*, 32. On the renewed recent focus on paradox in its various forms as a constant aspect of the medieval tradition, see Caroline Bynum, *Christian Materiality* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 53-58, 120-121, 267-273. For a historical account establishing this in the context of medieval and Renaissance Florence, see Richard C. Trexler, "Florentine Religious Experience: The Sacred Image," *Studies in the Renaissance* 19 (1972): 7-41.

## CHAPTER 1

### NICOLAUS CUSANUS' PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD IN *DE DOCTA IGNORANTIA*

(1437-1440)

#### 1. The historical context

The circumstances in which Nicolaus Cusanus developed the philosophical method that forms the basis of his *De Docta Ignorantia* are crucially relevant, first and foremost, for establishing the relevance of the sources on which I will base my account of his method—his extant writings from 1438 to 1440, comprising *De Docta Ignorantia* itself and four sermons, numbered XIX-XXII in the nomenclature of the Heidelberg edition. I am thus excluding from direct focus his earlier sermons and treatises as not directly relevant to the investigation of the new method Cusanus developed<sup>38</sup>. But what justifies locating the development of his new method within these particular works? For this it is important to examine Nicholas' own account of the circumstances of his conception of the work, in the form of the 'Letter of the Author to Cardinal Julian' (Giuliano Cesarini, Cardinal of St. Angelo, to whom the work is dedicated) added to the end of *De Docta Ignorantia*<sup>39</sup>. In this short letter he describes the three books of *DDI* as:

... the things which I have long desired to attain by various doctrinal-approaches but could not—until, while I was at sea en route back from Greece, I was led (by, as I believe, a heavenly gift from the Father of Lights ...) to embrace—in learned ignorance [*docta ignorantia*] and through a

<sup>38</sup> Scholars generally share this view: see, e.g., Moffit-Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus*, 35, note 4, for a thorough list of sources; more recently, Casarella, "Introduction", in *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*, p.xxv; Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues*, pp.42-43, 92-94.

<sup>39</sup> "*Epistola auctoris ad dominum Iulianum cardinalem*", *DDI* III.263-264. I will be using the Heidelberg Academy Edition of Cusanus' works for all Latin source text. Translations provided will be from Jasper Hopkins' English translations of *DDI* and *ADI* unless otherwise specified; translations of the passages from the sermons are my own. A crucial note must be made about the manner of quoting passages from *De Docta Ignorantia*: the format I use is either: book number (Roman numerals), dot, chapter number (Cusanus' own division), dot, paragraph number (in the Heidelberg Academy edition) (e.g. 'I.5.16'), or: book number, dot, paragraph number (in the Heidelberg Academy edition) (e.g. 'II.153'). In all cases the last number is the paragraph number, which is by itself sufficient as the Heidelberg Academy edition numbers all paragraphs in *DDI* consecutively and uniquely. I give book and chapter numbers where it is important to have a quick overview of the context of the statements and their place in Cusanus' argument, which proceeds more or less linearly throughout the book.

transcending of the incorruptible truths which are humanly knowable—  
 incomprehensible things incomprehensibly [*incomprehensibilia  
 incorruptibiliter*].<sup>40</sup>

Here Nicholas describes a theoretical breakthrough by means of a ‘gift’ from God—an event which, according to him, happened on the return trip to Venice from his 1437 journey to Constantinople as papal envoy to the Byzantine court on the matter of organizing what would be the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438-1445), at which a short-lived union between the Western and Eastern Christian churches, divided since the 1054 Great Schism, was achieved<sup>41</sup>. The return trip took from November 27, 1437 to February 8, 1438. Sometime during this period, Cusanus recounts<sup>42</sup>, he received the ‘gift’ which ‘led’ him to ‘embrace’ ‘incomprehensible things incomprehensibly’, which he had been unable to do before, with the help of ‘learned ignorance’ – the explicitly paradoxical expression which gives the work its title and encompasses the fundamental principle of his philosophical method<sup>43</sup>. The *explicit*

<sup>40</sup> DDI III.263: *iam dudum attingere variis doctrinarum viis concupivi, sed prius non potui, quousque in mari me ex Graecia redeunte, credo superno dono a patre luminum, a quo omne datum optimum, ad hoc ductus sum, ut incomprehensibilia incorruptibiliter amplecterer in docta ignorantia, per transcendens veritatum incorruptibilium humaniter scibilium.*

<sup>41</sup> For a detailed historical account of his activities around 1437-1440, broadly comprising the events surrounding his voyage to Greece and his activities in the time period of the composition of *De Docta Ignorantia*, see Bond, “Nicholas of Cusa from Constantinople to *Learned Ignorance*: The Historical Matrix for the Formation of *De Docta Ignorantia*,” in *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church: Essays in Memory of Chandler McCuskey Brooks*, ed. Gerald Christianson, Thomas M. Izbicki (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 135-151. For an authoritative biography of Cusanus, see Eric Meuthen, *Nicholas of Cusa: A Sketch for a Biography*, tr. David Crowner and Gerald Christianson (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), a translation of the 7<sup>th</sup> (1992) edition of Meuthen’s still often-cited *Nikolaus von Kues: Skizze einer Biographie* (Muenster: Aschendorff, 1964)—for Cusanus’ activities around 1437-1440 see p.51-74. For further detailed historical accounts of events, places, and people relevant to Cusanus’ activities generally, see Watanabe, Christianson, Izbicki, ed., *Nicolaus Cusanus: A Companion to his Life and his Times* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), 114-125 for the time period I am focusing on, particularly the article on Pope Eugenius IV.

<sup>42</sup> Most scholars take Cusanus’ claim as to his ‘illumination’ on the voyage from Greece at face value, as consonant with the available evidence. However, many also reference the alternate account of Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle, who, in “Cusanus at Sea – The Topicality of Illuminative Discourse,” *The Journal of Religion* 71, no. 2 (1991): 180-201, presents an interesting argument to the effect that the ‘Letter’ is an instance of epideictic rhetoric, and thus the ‘voyage at sea’ should not be read as necessarily referring to a physical voyage at all; it is, in this interpretation, rather a meaningful trope within a traditionally given framework of references, ‘the precise and perfect site for divine illumination’ (p.184). Given the lack of direct evidence of the stages of composition and writing of *DDI*, this interpretation needs to be mentioned as a serious alternative to the ‘standard’ account. Yet, the content of the sermons that Cusanus worked on starting from 1438 is marked by a noticeable change in content and method (Bond, *Historical Matrix*, 158-59; Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues*, 71, 95-97) – which strongly supports the approximate dating, if not the literal events, of the ‘standard’ account.

<sup>43</sup> The English ‘learned ignorance’ preserves in its form an ambiguity found in the Latin *docta ignorantia*: it means not only ignorance that must be learned (which is nothing else than the knowledge of the extent of our ignorance, i.e. the knowledge of the limits of our knowledge—DDI I.1.4) but also a sign of intellectual

appended to this dedicatory letter shows that he finished *DDI* in Kues on February 12, 1440. His sermon *Dies Sanctificatus*, preached on Christmas Day, 1440, in Koblenz (XXII in the numbering of the Heidelberg edition) is acknowledged by scholars as developing the themes of *De Docta Ignorantia* and as belonging to this definite period in Cusanus' thought that I am investigating<sup>44</sup>. There is no such consensus on the major work he wrote next, between 1441 and 1442, *De Conjecturis* ("On Conjectures"); a number of important scholars have argued that it should be considered separately from *DDI* in the development of Nicholas' thought<sup>45</sup>. I will avoid dealing with this contentious issue, which is outside my scope here. Thus, I focus on the period 1438 to 1440, when, as scholars generally agree, Cusanus developed a systematic treatise from the insight he says gained on the voyage back from Greece. On the issue of the novelty of the method he developed at this time, I will also refer to his own later *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* ("Defense of Learned Ignorance", 1449) which defends *De Docta Ignorantia* against the attack by Heidelberg scholastic theologian Johannes Wenck in *De Ignota Litteratura*, 1442/43<sup>46</sup>. I will refer particularly to the short account that Cusanus gives therein of the writing of *DDI*, which, even though a later self-justification, is nonetheless revealing as to some crucial aspects of his method.

---

achievement (i.e. 'learned' pronounced 'learn-ED', meaning 'educated ignorance'). See Hopkins, *On Learned Ignorance*, 2-3; Miller, *Reading Cusanus*, 12-14.

<sup>44</sup> Bond, *Historical Matrix*, 158-59; Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues*, 95-97; see also Clyde Lee Miller, *Reading Cusanus: Metaphor and Dialectic in a Conjectural Universe* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), p.59 note 40.

<sup>45</sup> Koch (quoted in Hudson, *Becoming God*, p.46, note 5) argued that between *De Docta Ignorantia* and *De Conjecturis* Cusanus switched from a *Seinsmetaphysik* to an *Einheitsmetaphysik*. Moffitt-Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus* (1982), 26, also argued that there is a 'quantum leap' between Nicholas' system in *DDI* and in *De Conjecturis*. Against the notion that there is any fundamental change in Cusanus' system are Haubst, e.g., "Nikolaus von Kues und die analogia entis," in his *Streifzuege*, p. 232-242, and Hopkins in his 'Introduction' to *Nicholas of Cusa on God as Not-other: A Translation and an Appraisal of De Li Non Aliud* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 11. The best published periodization of Cusanus' thought generally I take to be that of Kurt Flasch in *Nikolaus von Kues*, 42-44, which also sets *De Docta Ignorantia* and *De Conjecturis* as belonging to different stages of the development of his thought.

<sup>46</sup> For an overview of the dispute, translations of both treatises, and a careful interpretation of the contentious points, see Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Debate with John Wenck: A Translation and an Appraisal of De Ignota Litteratura and Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Banning, 1988). On this dispute see also Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues*, 181-194.



No other evidence exists regarding the nature of this ‘illumination’ than Cusanus’ own few words, and the works he composed shortly afterwards. One particularly intriguing possibility is that his novel insight had something to do with conversations he might have had while on the journey with the Greek members of the Eastern delegation<sup>47</sup>. The possibility that he might have studied Eastern Christian writings in Constantinople is similarly intriguing, yet uncertain; he spent only a little more than two months there, and his command of Greek is an issue on which scholars are divided<sup>48</sup>. While the ‘Eastern’ character of some of Cusanus’ arguments has been persuasively argued by Hudson, the means of such an influence remain disputed<sup>49</sup>. Little is known of how Cusanus developed his theoretical considerations and the manuscript of *DDI* in the busy two years, 1438 to 1440, when he was occupied most of the time with diplomatic missions to various courts as papal envoy in the long-lasting and acrimonious dispute between Pope Eugenius IV and the Council of Basel; scholars conjecture that he must have taken the manuscript with him on his extensive travels during this period<sup>50</sup>. A final interesting issue concerning his activities at this time is the historical question of when Cusanus is likely to have seen Masaccio’s *Trinity* fresco in Florence for the first time. I will argue that it can be established with good probability that he had the opportunity to see it first in 1437, before he left for Constantinople, and also in early 1438 upon his return. That he could have seen this artwork for the first time so close to developing his novel philosophical method that, I will argue, shares fundamental similarities to Masaccio’s (and his collaborators’) own approach, is an intriguing likelihood, though of course not enough to

---

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g., Bond, *The Historical Matrix*, 143; Watanabe, Christianson, Izbicki, ed., *A Companion*, 85. This is a contentious point; it is possible that Cusanus travelled on a different ship altogether than the Greeks; see Hudson, *Becoming God*, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Casarella argues against Cusanus’ proficiency in Greek from the lack of marginalia in Greek manuscripts he owned (quoted in Hudson, *Becoming God*, p.3 note 7).

<sup>49</sup> Hudson, in *Becoming God*, 3-4, argues for an indirect influence by means of secondary Latin sources that Cusanus would have been acquainted with: Berthold of Moosburg’s *Commentary on Proclus’ Elements of Theology*, the works of Meister Eckhart, and those of Eriugena.

<sup>50</sup> Bond, *Historical Matrix*, 151-153, underlines that completing such a theoretical work with such a busy schedule is in itself remarkable. In the same essay Bond reviews the latest research on Cusanus’ use of sources during his writing of *De Docta Ignorantia* – p.153-159.

warrant talk of ‘influence’. I will deal with this issue in the first section of Chapter III.

## 2. Cusanus’ method

The question I am focusing on in this chapter is what this new theoretical insight that Cusanus claims to have gained in late 1437 or early 1438 amounts to, and how we can best express the philosophical method developed from it. According to his own testimony in *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*, the crucial insight of *DDI* ‘did not come to [him] by study but rather by the gift of God’, and that ‘at the time I received [this] thought [*conceptum*] from on high I had not examined ... any of the true theologians’<sup>51</sup>, whom he consulted afterwards, finding ‘nothing else than ... that which had been revealed [to me] in a variety of forms’<sup>52</sup>. This distinguishing of the initial thought (*conceptum*) that is developed and then brought to bear on the works of other authors in the tradition will inform my presentation of Cusanus’ method. This is also how he describes the structure of *De Docta Ignorantia* in the Letter to Cardinal Julian, written after having completed it: ‘[these small books] which, [since they proceed] from [one and] the same principle [*ex eodem principio*], can be condensed or expanded [*artari vel extendi possunt*]’<sup>53</sup>. In the Preface, also in the form of a letter to Cardinal Julian at the beginning of the work, Cusanus also characterizes what will follow as a *modus ratiocinandi*, a “mode of reasoning”<sup>54</sup>. All this points to his conception of his own work as a large-scale effort organized according to a common principle. Although, as Kurt Flasch

---

<sup>51</sup> ADI 16: ...*nullo studio tibi advenerit consideratio, quam in Docta ignorantia aperuisti, sed Dei dono*; 17: *Fateor ... non me Dionysium aut quemquam theologorum verorum tunc vidisse, quando desuper conceptum recepi*. These assertions by Cusanus, albeit from a decade after the writing of *DDI*, can be taken as important clues to the nature of his method; cf. Bond, *The Historical Matrix*, 154-155, 158.

<sup>52</sup> ADI 17: ...*sed avido cursu me ad doctorum scripta contuli et nihil nisi revelatum varie figuratum inveni*. The translation is mine, which here does not agree with Hopkins’ but does with the sense of Dupre’s German rendition.

<sup>53</sup> *DDI* III.263: ...*qui ex eodem principio artari possunt vel extendi*. The words “since they proceed” are added in Hopkins’ translation and not present in the original; they do not distort the meaning here, but place the emphasis on the contents of the books, as opposed to the common principle from which they are derived. Here Cusanus seems to affirm that from the same *principium* one could derive theoretical considerations that could take significantly different forms and structures than those developed in *DDI*—itself an important result and one which supports the type of investigation into his method that I am undertaking.

notes, ‘almost all books on Cusanus propose an interpretation of *De Docta Ignorantia*,’<sup>55</sup> I will be presenting his method in a form that has not been employed before<sup>56</sup>, but which is singularly useful in elucidating the steps of Cusanus’ argument.

The method, at its most abstract, consists of a way of developing a series of descriptions, or names, for a paradoxical object: something that is by definition impossible to describe, or to name. The method can thus be developed as a solution to a philosophical puzzle: How to define that which is, by definition, indefinable? Let us call this object, defined as indefinable, ‘X’. It is apparent that we are confronted here with a paradox, as the definition of X appears to state that X has no definition. Is the definition of X as indefinable itself a definition? Both answers, ‘yes’ and ‘no,’ imply contradictions. If we say it *is* the definition, it follows from the definition itself that it is not; the only way in which ‘X is indefinable’ can be the definition of X is if it is *not* the definition of X. . We are dealing here with a particular form of the Liar paradox, commonly studied in philosophical logic, which can be put in the basic form: “this sentence is false”; attempting to determine whether the ‘Liar sentence’ is true or false produces the paradox.

In analyzing the Liar sentence, we seem to be stuck in an endless circle of ‘it is true, therefore it is false’ and ‘it is false, therefore it is true’; the same occurs in the version we are here analyzing, trying to give an account of the object X which is defined as being indefinable. In response to the challenge posed to most versions of classical logic by paradoxes such as this, one of the solutions taken up by contemporary logicians in recent

---

<sup>54</sup> *DDI* I.1: ...*in rebus divinis talem qualem ratiocinandi modum...*

<sup>55</sup> Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues*, 94: “*Fast alle Buecher ueber Cusanus bringen eine Interpretation von DDI*”. Cf. Moffit-Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus*, p.25.

<sup>56</sup> The main sources of inspiration for my account of his method are: Karen Hudson’s *Becoming God* (2007), with whom my interpretation of Cusanus’ thought largely agrees; Clyde Lee Miller’s account of *De Docta Ignorantia* in his *Reading Cusanus: Metaphor and Dialectic in a Conjectural Universe* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 11-67, which focuses on Cusanus’ successive levels of paradox; and Graham Priest’s attempts to develop a generalized ‘logic of paradox’ with his dual scheme of ‘Closure’ and ‘Transcendence’, a two-step repeating pattern which is to an extent similar to two consecutive ‘stages’ in my scheme—see, e.g., Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), in particular his ‘inclosure scheme’, p.156ff.

decades has been to develop non-classical logics, which broadly take more types of truth value than only ‘true’ and ‘false’<sup>57</sup>. However, there is one other possible approach which, although it does not ‘solve’ the paradox in the sense of rendering it no longer paradoxical, yields singularly interesting results; and, I contend, is the one which guides Cusanus’ paradox-centered method in *De Docta Ignorantia* on a fundamental level.

The approach proceeds thus: we consider X as indefinable object as the starting point, but instead of focusing on whether or not this is a definition or not, which would lead us into the ‘it is true, therefore it is false’ cycle, we instead assume it and think through the series of paradoxes that results if we attempt to preserve its truth. Thus we can reason: X would not be indefinable if it were defined by ‘X is indefinable’; therefore, beside being indefinable (as we have presupposed) X is *also* something else, i.e., X is also not indefinable, which is to say X is also (in some way) definable. At this point we have established, if our initial presupposition is to hold, that X must be indefinable and also definable at the same time—a contradictory account. But we do not stop here: if ‘X is indefinable and also X is definable’ would be a full definition of X, then X would not after all be indefinable, as we have presupposed in the beginning. The self-contradictory account of X must itself be negated, or—better put—a negation must be appended to it, so that the purported definition of X becomes: ‘X is indefinable (1) and also X is definable (2) and also X is not both indefinable and definable (3)’. According to the starting premise, that X is indefinable, we cannot stop here either, otherwise with this new formulation we would have reached a definition of X, which, by the definition we have assumed, is impossible. A further step is necessary: ‘X is indefinable (1) and also X is definable (2) and also X is not both indefinable and definable (3) and also X is not ‘indefinable and definable and not both indefinable and definable’, but rather something else altogether (4)’. And so on, ad infinitum, since no stopping point of the

---

<sup>57</sup> Priest is one of the more prominent and interesting proponents of such ‘paraconsistent’ logics. See, e.g., his defense of non-Aristotelian ‘dialetheic’ logic in his *In Contradiction: A Study of the Transconsistent*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

progression could be defined without needing to be then negated by the same method. The definition of X as undefinable shows itself to be equivalent to an infinite series, built in steps of successive negation; every successive step effectively adds 'and also not everything that came before'. Yet it is a positively constructed series and not mere empty negation, since the formulations of each particular step remain no less true for all the next steps, which just add further and further negations without eliminating that which has been already asserted: X *is* indefinable, and also X *is* definable, and also X *is* both indefinable and definable, etc. With this we have reached the striking conclusion that (together with everything else that X is) X *is* in fact also definable, which makes positive language about X possible. However, we must never lose sight of the infinite series which is implied and makes this conclusion possible: X is definable, but not simply as a regular, non-paradoxical definable thing. Rather, we must say X is definable inasmuch as (or even *because*) X is indefinable; yet we are not reduced to saying X is not 'really' definable but only metaphorically or symbolically. From the development of the argument we know that both have to be true: X is definable *and* X is indefinable (as well as every other step in the infinite series, which according to our method is, in effect, already implied as a whole when proposing the definition of X as indefinable). We can say then that we know X is definable, but we do not know *how*; the word 'definable' truly applies here, by our argument, but not in a manner that we can readily understand. This is not surprising, since we do not usually apply words such as 'definable' to paradoxical objects such as X. Although X, as paradoxical, would necessarily seem to evade our attempts to imagine it or think it in any way we are accustomed, we can nonetheless follow our argument and say: as well as indefinable, X is definable, and thus could even be defined by this or that non-paradoxical expression—as long as we do not lose sight of the fact that

---

(New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

whatever definition we can give X, this definition (although remaining true) must be itself negated at the following step in the infinite series, and so on.

The most important objection to this method and argument would have to be that such an infinite series is absurd, since it seems to involve asserting (an infinity of) contradictions. Even one contradiction, an objector might say, is usually enough in standard logical and mathematical proofs to show that what was presupposed was invalid—this is the commonly used method of *reductio ad absurdum*. Is this argument not precisely such a *reductio* of itself? Does it not rather establish that it is impossible to think such a paradoxical object X?

It is important to take this objection seriously and answer it pertinently, since the legitimacy of such paradoxical reasoning is at stake, a crucial issue for making sense of Cusanus' thought. First, one can remark that the infinite series also applies to all possible characterizations of its paradoxical object, either positive or negative, such as 'impossible to think'. It is indeed true that it is 'impossible to think' X; but if this were simply 'true' in a non-paradoxical way with nothing more to be said, we could then say that we have just found a fixed, stable definition for X: 'that which is impossible to think'. Yet, that cannot be the definition of X as it has no definition; therefore, it is also true according to our argument that, in addition to being 'impossible to think', X also *can* be thought, etc.; and the same goes for any way, positive or negative, in which we might characterize X. Thus, it is difficult, if not impossible, to assert anything 'simple' or non-paradoxical about X, which includes also every assertion that would seek to deny the legitimacy of reasoning about X in this manner ('absurd', 'inconceivable', etc.). Attempting to 'exclude' X by any such characterizations is therefore a misunderstanding of X's definition and our argument.

But this does not answer the main point of the objection, which must be ultimately put in these terms: Is it *allowed* to think of such paradoxical objects and in such paradoxical terms? In the end, it seems to be a question of rules and permissions—and in the Western

intellectual tradition developing such modes of thought dealing with paradox has been historically difficult in this regard due to the status of the ‘Law of Non-Contradiction’ of Aristotelian origin, which has been the accepted ‘orthodoxy’ and arguably has been taken up by ‘nearly every Western philosopher and logician’ before the twentieth century on traditional authority<sup>58</sup>. Thus, the objection could be addressed in terms of proposing a revision, or extension, of traditional practice in logic and philosophical thought—a project active, e.g., in contemporary logic. But such an argument is outside the scope of this thesis. One form of argument that is within my scope, however, proposes such a method of thought as the most fruitful way to understand Cusanus’ philosophical method in *De Docta Ignorantia*, and even—according to Cusanus, and also some modern commentators<sup>59</sup>—crucial aspects of the Christian tradition. This is what I will substantiate in what follows.

In short, the method I have outlined takes a paradoxically-defined object and derives a description, or definition, of it consisting in an infinite series of paradoxically compounded negations which at the same time yield true propositions about its object at every step in the series. This is the basic mode of thought which Cusanus employs in *De Docta Ignorantia* and the core of his philosophical method. The object of his method, the paradoxically-defined ‘object X’, is, in Cusanus’ account, God as conceived in the Christian tradition. Nicholas applies the method to all the major dogmas of Christian faith: the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Resurrection, the Church both Militant and Triumphant, and, finally, the infinite and infinitely progressing union with God (*deificatio*) of every Christian in the life to come. Thus,

---

<sup>58</sup> Such is the argument developed by, e.g., Graham Priest, in his *Doubt Truth To Be A Liar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7 and *passim*; and in his *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 4ff. Priest’s account assigns great importance to Cusanus in the Western tradition, as one of the very few philosophical thinkers to have decisively gone beyond the limits of the Aristotelian ‘law’. To be sure, Priest’s formalizing method and ‘analytic’ concerns are far removed from Cusanus’ far less formal method and philosophical-theological focus; and Priest’s reading of him is reductive, giving an image of Cusanus as a much more unsubtle thinker than I am arguing, in consonance with most Cusanus scholars, is in fact the case. It is also not obvious that Priest’s logical formalisms allow him to develop paradoxical thought further than Cusanus’ extensive systematic treatment, not necessarily encumbered by its lack of modern logic’s abstract formalism—as I will attempt to show.

<sup>59</sup> See, e.g., Miller, *Reading Cusanus*, 11-67; Bond, *Introduction*, 35.

he achieves a novel philosophical synthesis of the various elements of the tradition with the help of this principle.

It is characteristic of this method that the context in which an assertion is made is crucial, since at every particular ‘step’ of an infinite series derived by means of this method the set of already-proven propositions, i.e., results obtained at the previous step of the series, is different, and thus two different ‘levels’ can contain claims which would be in radical contradiction if made on the same level, but necessarily coexist on distinct levels. Cusanus would certainly argue that when discussing Christ properly in a Christian context a number of paradoxical presuppositions, indeed different distinct levels of paradox building upon each other, are presupposed: the paradoxical God, the Trinity, the Incarnation. *Docta ignorantia* implies an awareness of these respective paradoxical steps; without such an awareness, he explicitly argues, Christian worship (as well as *any* religious worship generally) is idolatry<sup>60</sup>. It is thus most useful for us<sup>61</sup> to devise a system of notation in order to distinguish the different ‘steps’ in such an infinite series.

Cusanus’ method is structured on the question of what God is, developing it sequentially through the three books of *De Docta Ignorantia* while advancing through the steps of such a series. Thus I propose using the following notation, naming each distinct step as ‘S’ plus an index number, as follows (together with a one-sentence example of the kinds of assertions we find on that specific level):

- S1 - ordinary language, ‘God is none of the particular finite things’
- S2 - coincidence of opposites; ‘God is both X and non-X’
- S3 - cosmic order; ‘God is beyond X and non-X’; ‘God is in all things, paradoxically’
- S4 - Incarnation; ‘God is one particular X, Christ’
- S5 - Church; ‘God is beyond divine-human’; ‘God is in the Church, paradoxically’
- S6 - Resurrection; ‘God is united with the Church’

<sup>60</sup> *DDI* I.16.86: ...*Deus non coleretur ut Deus infinitus, sed potius ut creatura; et talis cultura idolatria est.*

<sup>61</sup> In this I follow Cusanus’ own remark in *DDI* I.1.2 – the more steps one has to go through from initial premises to proof in a mathematical proof, the more difficult and laborious it is: *dum multis mediis opus habemus, difficultas et labor exoritur.*



- S7 - Afterlife; ‘God is beyond the Church’; ‘God is in the Church, face to face’  
 S8 - Infinite God; ‘God is an experience that is even beyond ‘face to face’’  
 S9 - Infinite Order; ‘God is beyond S8 experience’; ‘God is in the Church anew’

The series continues, for any even number  $n$ , according to the general pattern:

- $S_n$  - Paradox: ‘God is the paradoxical coincidence of terms that at  $S_{n-1}$  were defined as being irreconcilably opposite’  
 $S_{n+1}$  - Order: ‘God is beyond the  $S_n$  coincidence of opposites; thus God is paradoxically present to all things relative to  $S_n$ ’<sup>62</sup>.

The method is thus based on a recurrent pattern: something that was asserted to be impossible on a certain step of the argument ( $S_{n-1}$ ), i.e., the coincidence of a pair of opposites, is asserted as being the case on the next step of the argument ( $S_n$  - the ‘Paradox’ step), whereas  $S_{n+1}$ , the ‘Order’ step, asserts that the paradoxical object (for Cusanus, God<sup>63</sup>) is beyond the paradoxical formulation reached at  $S_n$ . This means that God is both the coincidence of opposites and not that but rather something else entirely—which means it is possible to apply to God non-paradoxical relations and names from  $S_{n-1}$ , as long as one does not lose track of the fact that God is *also* the  $S_n$  formulation. The conjunction of an apparent

<sup>62</sup> Cusanus did not himself develop such a ‘notation’; thus, some of the choices I’ve made as to ordering and naming the stages, although not arbitrary, could in principle be improved and other formulations of Cusanus’ method are certainly possible. To my knowledge, mine is the first such multi-level paradox-focused account of Cusanus’ method that has been proposed. Generally, commentators who focus on paradox in *De Docta Ignorantia* underplay the systematic ordered nature of the work (e.g., Miller), while, in contrast, those who try to elicit Cusanus’ ‘system’ de-emphasize the role of paradox (e.g., Hopkins). The crucial requirement for any complete formulation of Cusanus’ method is ultimately, I argue, that it is able to account for an ordered, systematically-developed progression through stages in which each successive one ‘breaks’ the framework constructed in the previous by asserting as true what at the previous stage was asserted as impossible. Not accounting for this recurring pattern in Cusanus’ thought leads to distorted, reductive or one-sided accounts—a situation much lamented in the literature. See, e.g., Haubst, *Streifzuege*, 21-22.

<sup>63</sup> He makes this identification throughout *De Docta Ignorantia*, most obviously in naming God the *maximum* with which the *minimum* coincides (I.1.5). This might be seen to create theological difficulties about God being one and about the Trinity, doctrines which Cusanus spends some time defending. But the philosophical peculiarities of the ‘defined as indefinable’ paradoxical object lend themselves easily to this purpose. First, the polytheist’s objection fails readily, as saying there are two such paradoxical objects, or more, implies being able to distinguish them, and thus defines them in some way or another; thus, if one talks about ‘more’ such objects in a non-paradoxical way she is not talking about such objects at all—multiplicity cannot be non-paradoxically asserted, just as no other conceivable property can. It is more appropriate to say, then, that the paradoxical object is both one and many, at the same time, without excluding the other; and at the same time neither one nor many; etc.—which is how Cusanus can then easily defend the Trinity, as I will show below. His arguments as to God being “one” as opposed to “many” take the basic form of “we should say God is ‘one’ because otherwise, with the presuppositions, standards and rules I assume the readers share, the paradoxes that would result from the notion of God being ‘many’ would render the mode of thought I assume the readers share unintelligible.” The same is the case for his defense of God being three and not four, etc.

Sn-1 mode of speaking with an Sn statement of paradox gives a paradoxical mode of positive assertion: a new level, Sn+1.

As a consequence, at Sn+1 all things can be seen as ordered in certain “Sn-1 – like” relationships to that paradoxical object, which relationships, though incomprehensible due to the simultaneous assertion of the paradox at Sn, are nonetheless affirmable. At the same time Sn+1 is a step on which, due to the positively affirmable relationships between God and all things, a fundamental distinction is maintained: e.g., God is not a creature, no creature is God (S3). This provides precisely the pair of opposites that are asserted to coincide at the next S-level: Christ is both God and creature (S4); this establishes (as its own Sn+1 stage) the Church as a ‘reordering’ of the cosmos, which maintains the distinction between God and Church (S5); this in turn is paradoxically asserted to be overcome at the next level (S6) where God and Church become united; and the pattern continues *ad infinitum*. It is a series which can never be completed, since at any step on which it would ‘stop’, a further ‘Paradox’ step that explicitly contradicts the previous one can be constructed<sup>64</sup>.

---

<sup>64</sup> The method I am proposing shows important similarities to a three-step scheme constructed after the manner of Pseudo-Dionysius, sixth-century theologian, a great influence on Cusanus and one of the authors he quotes extensively. On Pseudo-Dionysius and his relationship to Nicholas, see, e.g., Hudson’s detailed account in *Becoming God*, 35-44, situating Pseudo-Dionysius and Cusanus within the same ‘Christian Neoplatonic’ tradition. For a comparison of how Cusanus and Pseudo-Dionysius deal with the paradoxical nature of God within this tradition, see Werner Beierwaltes, *Der Verborgene Gott: Cusanus und Dionysius*, Trierer Cusanus Lecture 4 (Trier: Paulinus Verlag, 1997).

On the three-step pattern in Cusanus and Pseudo-Dionysius, see Miller, *Reading Cusanus*, 19-21. Miller refers to the three steps as affirmation, negation, and hyper-negation or eminence (21), which name stages in Pseudo-Dionysius’ methodology regarding naming God in his *Mystical Theology*: in short, positive finite attributes are asserted of God, then in a ‘truer’ way are denied of God, then in the third step one must move ‘beyond’ negation, i.e., beyond the opposition of affirmation-negation, ultimately into an “‘other’ ontological domain” (21). This method of ‘negation of negation’, or ‘hyper-negation’, which paradoxically yields more than silence (see his note 13, p.20-21), seems to be the same kind of paradoxical construction that I have called the passage from ‘Sn’ to ‘Sn+1’. As Miller remarks, there are a number of crucial differences: the ‘Cusanic’ triad seems to function as ‘order – paradox – new, paradoxical level of order’—the two initial ‘steps’ in the Dionysian triad are radically modified, so that negation is effectively the first step, paradox is the second (i.e., concomitant affirmation and negation), and a new ‘conceptual and linguistic space’ (26) opens up on the third, so that paradoxically positive affirmations about God are made possible (22-23). Thus, Miller claims, Cusanus manages to go beyond Pseudo-Dionysius’ method with his own. As Bond also affirms, in his excellent overview Introduction to his translations of several of Cusanus’ texts, *Nicolaus Cusanus: Selected Spiritual Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 33, Cusanus is able to “use the accomplishments of both [Dionysius’] negative and positive ways and at the same time to exceed them” by what Bond calls ‘coincident theology’. For a classical three-step interpretation of Cusanus’ method fundamentally similar to Miller and Bond’s, see also Klaus Jacobi, *Die Methode der cusanischen Philosophie* (Freiburg: Alber, 1969). My account of Cusanus’ method accommodates all these three-step schemes and fits both Miller’s and Bond’s assessments; all the same, its

This form of argument is an application of the basic abstract method examined above, which takes the paradoxical defined-as-indefinable object X and generates the infinite series of X's 'definition' by successively adding a negation of the previous step. If this appears too abstract to grasp, one can think of X as something one might call a 'slippery object': we cannot grasp it by means of any definition, name, or rule we try to apply to it, and thus for a more complete account we must add also the negation of the definition, name or rule; but the negation itself has become another 'rule' which must be broken, etc. Many paradoxical formulations can be deduced in various ways from these simple premises: e.g., that X is not an object, and not not-an-object, etc.; that X is not X, and not not-X, and not X nor not-X nor not not-X, etc. What concerns us here is that the best way of understanding Cusanus' account of God and his chain of paradoxical arguments is to follow such a line of thought, seeing God as such a 'slippery object'. This method emerges from a close reading of the relevant passages in *De Docta Ignorantia* and the way Cusanus describes the movement between successive steps, which I will treat in detail from section 2.1 below.

My account of Cusanus' method may raise a possible objection, however; it seems that I have reduced it to an abstract scheme that effectively functions without depending on any presuppositions, either of a metaphysical or theological nature. Indeed, the account of a 'radically slippery object' X that is defined as being indefinable, and the infinite series of negations that results, does not seem to depend on whether we consider X as 'existing' or not, as 'possible' or 'impossible', or whichever other attribute we might assign to it. In fact, even beyond not depending on presuppositions, the account of X seems to be of a nature to effectively destroy all presuppositions about X whatsoever; since X is 'radically slippery', if it is affirmed as 'existing' at a certain step in the argument, its non-existence will have to be

---

recursive form, defining not a series of three steps but an infinite series in which even the 'new conceptual space' opened up by 'hyper-negation' is subject to being overcome by the assertion of paradox, which opens up yet another new conceptual space, etc., makes this 'Cusanic' method powerful enough to deal with the 'layered

affirmed in a subsequent one; if it does not exist, it will also necessarily exist at another step, as well as neither exist nor not exist at the next step, etc. It seems that nothing can be simply ‘affirmed’ of X without at the same time paradoxically affirming an infinite series of negations and negations-of-negations which follow. But this abstract self-referentiality seems *prima facie* at odds with Cusanus’ text, in which he seems to be concerned to prove some propositions of God and restrict others: e.g., God’s existence (I.6.15-17). How, then, can I justify such an interpretation, which *prima facie* seems counter-intuitive?

For this examination I will apply to the text a methodological criterion that Cusanus himself explicitly provides in *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* on the very issue of how to avoid misinterpretations of his method in *DDI*. He writes:

whoever examines the mind of someone writing on some point ought to read carefully all his writings and ought to resolve [his statements on this point] into one consistent meaning [*unam concordantam sententiam*]. For from truncated writings it is easy to find something which by itself seems inconsistent [*dissonum*] but which when compared with the whole corpus is [seen to be] consistent [*concordans*]<sup>65</sup> (tr. Jasper Hopkins)

The crucial issue is what ‘consistent’ and ‘inconsistent’ may be taken to mean. These words, in Hopkins’ translation quoted here, are problematic choices, as in English by default they carry connotations of classical logic, i.e., avoiding all contradiction. Cusanus, explicitly making use of contradiction and paradox and reproaching, in the *Apology*, his contemporary theologians as adepts of the ‘Aristotelic sect’ (*Aristotelica secta*) for deeming the coincidence of opposites ‘heresy’, does not have such a meaning in mind<sup>66</sup>—rather, the words he uses

---

paradoxes’ which Cusanus deals with, e.g., in the case of Christ. It is fitting, then, that Cusanus only quotes Pseudo-Dionysius in book I of *De Docta Ignorantia*, which does not advance beyond the stage I call S3.

<sup>65</sup> ADI 24: *Oportet enim, qui scribentis in re aliqua mentem investigat, ut omnia scripta legat attente et in unam concordantem sententiam resolvat. Facile est enim ex truncatis scripturis aliquid reperiri, quod in se videtur dissonum; sed collatum ad integritatem voluminis est concordans.*

<sup>66</sup> Some interpreters try to argue, against the obvious reading, that Cusanus at no point asserts actual contradictories, and thus that the paradoxes he apparently employs are merely functions of language, striking juxtapositions put together for didactic purposes—see, e.g., Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa’s Dialectical Mysticism: Text, Translation, and Interpretive Study of De visione Dei* (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1985), 36-41. For a refutation of Hopkins’ ‘rationalizing’ reading, see Hudson, *Becoming God*, 109-117. For a review of such a ‘tendency’ of some interpreters, particularly Neo-Scholastics (*Neuscholastischen*), to view

here are *concordans*, ‘being in agreement/in harmony’ and *dissonum*, literally ‘dissonant’ or ‘discordant’. My argument is that only such a kind of interpretation of Cusanus’ method as I propose is able to achieve the goal of rendering his various statements, at various times seemingly inconsistent<sup>67</sup>, into one unified, coherent and consistent whole (by design, though, not according to Aristotelian logic). The alternative, to consider Nicholas as having been carelessly inconsistent<sup>68</sup>, betrays the task that he sets for us with the criterion that he himself provides.

It is also necessary to remark on a fact which is nonetheless easy to overlook: as the Letter Dedicatory and the Letter to Cardinal Julian attest, *De Docta Ignorantia* is a work composed in, and for, a certain context with particular presuppositions: The work is presented as being written by a Catholic priest<sup>69</sup> to a Catholic prelate. Thus, Cusanus implicitly presupposed that both author and recipient, in their pontifical duties, were well-versed at least in the topics that correspond to the stage I have labeled “S5”: the Church itself is a presupposed reality. Thus, we cannot expect Cusanus to proceed in ‘logical order’, exclusively from S1 to S2, S3, etc., as I have done in naming the steps. Rather, as we should expect, he occasionally jumps freely between levels, though following a consistent pattern of overall advancement of the argument: S4 is reached only in book III, and S5,6,7,8,9 consecutively only in the few final chapters. My division into S1, S2, etc. is in the logical order of the method as presented abstractly, not in the chronological order of Cusanus’ invoking them in *DDI*—though it corresponds with the latter to an important extent.

---

Cusanus’ *coincidentia oppositorum* as an assertion of contradiction rather than as *coincidentia contrariorum* (which would eliminate paradox), see Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues*, 58-61, where he addresses such interpretations at length, refuting them decisively..

<sup>67</sup> See, for instance, the issue of the circle-inscribing polygon image (which I treat in section 3.3.2 below) or the issue of Cusanus’ apparently shifting use of rhetorical questions (section 3.3.3).

<sup>68</sup> Hopkins, for instance, does this frequently—see his introduction to his translation of *DDI*, *On Learned Ignorance* (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1985), iv, 1, 6, 41-46.

<sup>69</sup> Cusanus was a priest by 1440, although the date of his ordination is unclear; he might have become one as early as 1436.

I will now move through the stages, showing how they are explicit in the text of *De Docta Ignorantia*. Due to constraints of space and topic, many aspects and themes of this complex work will not be dealt with, or only sketched; however, the method can easily be applied further to any issue in *DDI* on the pattern provided with fruitful results.

## 2.1. S1 – Order: ordinary, non-paradoxical language and knowledge

Cusanus starts his preliminary arguments (I.1) by focusing on the issue of our everyday knowledge. All our knowledge is fundamentally comparative, gained by establishing a comparative relation (*proportio*) between what is to be known and what is presupposed as already known, or certain<sup>70</sup>. Names are also assigned to things by virtue of such a comparative relation<sup>71</sup>, but this means knowledge is always susceptible of ‘more’ and ‘less’; since the two elements that are put in a comparative relation are necessarily different, there can always be ‘more’ or ‘less’ agreement between knowledge and its object. Therefore, perfect, or ‘precise’, knowledge of anything in particular is impossible<sup>72</sup>. Cusanus’ theory of knowledge equates perfect knowledge with an identity of knower and known; only then is there maximum knowledge which can no longer be more and less<sup>73</sup>. The paradigm for knowledge that he provides is measurement; the measure and the thing measured differ

<sup>70</sup> *DDI* I.1.2: *Omnes autem investigantes in comparatione praesuppositi certi proportionabiliter incertum iudicant; comparative igitur est omnis inquisitio, medio proportionis utens.*

<sup>71</sup> *DDI* I.5.13: *nomina hiis attributa sint rationis motu, quae quadam proportione excedens admittunt aut excessum.* Cf. I.24.74: *Omnia enim nomina ex quadam singularitate rationis, per quam discretio fit unius ab alio, imposita sunt.*

<sup>72</sup> *DDI* I.3.10: *Non potest igitur finitus intellectus rerum veritatem per similitudinem praecise attingere.* The only possible exception might occur in the case of thought entities such as mathematical objects. Interpreters of Cusanus differ on this issue. On the one hand, he asserts perfect knowledge of any kind is impossible; on the other hand, it seems we are able to conceive of mathematical figures without any imperfection playing a role. Miller notably argues that in Cusanus’ account perfect knowledge of mathematical objects is possible—Miller, *Reading Cusanus*, 16, yet Cusanus seems to state in *DDI* I.11.31 that between mathematical and empirical objects there is only a difference of degree in this respect. This complex issue, however, does not impinge either way on my argument.

<sup>73</sup> *DDI* I.3.10: *Veritas enim non est nec plus nec minus. ... Intellectus igitur, qui non est veritas, numquam veritatem adeo praecise comprehendit, quin per infinitum praecisius comprehendendi possit.* My analysis agrees with Miller, *Reading Cusanus*, 12-13.

indefinitely, and their agreement and disagreement can likewise increase or decrease—there is never full precision (*praecisio*). Only when the measure is identical to the object measured is perfect equality between them possible. Such a coincidence of knower and known constitutes perfect knowledge. Thus, we cannot have perfect knowledge of any object in the world: our knowledge—and, as a corollary, any name we assign to things based on such ‘knowledge-measurements’ as constitute our investigations—is always radically incomplete, and susceptible of an indefinite increase without ever reaching precise agreement with its object<sup>74</sup>. A crucial illustration that Cusanus uses is that of a polygon inscribed in a circle: the more the number of angles of the polygon increases, the more it is similar to the circle, without ever reaching identity with it—the intellect is thus in relation to truth<sup>75</sup>. This illustration crucially recurs later at S4, where what was asserted to be impossible here at S1 is asserted as fact, in accordance with the method I am describing.

Thus, at this level, S1, we are in this situation in relation to anything maximal, i.e. that does not come qualified with ‘more’ or ‘less’: precise knowledge, precise agreement in measurement, precise truth, are equally impossible to reach<sup>76</sup>. This, Cusanus says, is where the ‘root’ of ‘learned ignorance’ can be found<sup>77</sup>. Also, whatever is infinite is unknowable to us, since there is no *proportio* between finite and infinite<sup>78</sup>. Thus, God, who Cusanus calls the ‘Maximum’<sup>79</sup>, is also unknowable, unthinkable and unnameable<sup>80</sup>.

<sup>74</sup> DDI I.3.9: ...non posse aut duo aut plura adeo similia et aequalia reperiri, quin adhuc in infinitum similiora esse possint. hinc mensura et mensuratum, quantumcumque aequalia, semper differentia remanebunt.

<sup>75</sup> DDI I.3.9: ...intellectus ... habens se ad veritatem sicut polygonia ad circulum, quae quanto inscripta plurium angulorum fuerit, tanto similior circulo, numquam tamen efficitur aequalis, etiam si angulos in infinitum multiplicaverit, nisi in identitatem cum circulo se resolvat.

<sup>76</sup> DDI I.3.10: patet igitur de vero nos non aliud scire quam quod ipsum praecise, uti est, scimus incomprehensibile.

<sup>77</sup> DDI I.2.8: ...radicem doctae ignorantiae in inapprehensibili veritatis praecisione...

<sup>78</sup> DDI I.3.9: ...ex se manifestum est infiniti ad finitum proportionem non esse; I.1.3: ...infinitum ut infinitum, cum omnem proportionem aufugiat, ignotum est. This is not a novel principle but a common one found throughout medieval theology, e.g., in Thomas Aquinas (*Super Sententiis*, lib. 4 d. 49 q. 2 a. 1 ad 6: *finiti ad infinitum non possit esse proportio*; *De veritate*, q. 3 a. 1 arg. 7: *Sed nulla est proportio creaturae ad Deum, sicut nec finiti ad infinitum*), Bonaventure (*Super Sententiis* III, d. 14, a. 2, q.3), Duns Scotus (*Reportatio parisiensis* IV, dist. 49, q. 10, n.5: ...*nulla est proportio finiti ad infinitum*).

<sup>79</sup> He also makes the striking claims that this is ‘that which the faith of all nations indubitably believes to be God’ (I.2.5), and that ‘there was never any nation which did not worship God and which did not believe him to

These skeptical arguments as to the possibility of knowledge are only the starting point of the method. Cusanus starts the book with the initial assertion that ‘all things ... desire to exist in the best way possible’ and that they have ‘faculties ... adapted to this end’, given in accordance with ‘the gift of God’<sup>81</sup>; therefore, he deduces, our desire to know, though apparently impossible to satisfy, is not ‘in vain’ (*frustra*). Thus, Cusanus argues, the true object of our knowledge is not particular objects themselves, but our ignorance of them: we ‘desire to know that we are ignorant’<sup>82</sup>. Attaining ‘learned ignorance’ (*docta ignorantia*) is fully attaining this knowledge of our ignorance. The true measure of learning (the more *doctus* someone is) is the degree of becoming ‘perfected’ in ‘learned ignorance’<sup>83</sup>. But this is not at all merely a refusal of claims to knowledge—rather, by means of paradox, the impossibility of knowledge at this level is to be overcome. Indeed, a mere skeptic would object against Cusanus’ claim to know that our faculties are not ‘in vain’. How could he know such a proposition about the general nature of ‘gifts of God’ and of ‘all things’ with any certainty, since he argues in such a way for the fallibility of all human knowledge? Were Cusanus not to develop the argument further, to S2 and beyond, the objection would hold. Yet this seemingly problematic assertion of knowable divine purpose, together with the general positive statements about ‘all things’, becomes justified at the S3 stage, as we will see below.

---

be the absolute Maximum’ (I.4.18)—claims which, I argue, become much more intelligible and plausible if we account properly for the radically paradoxical nature of the object Cusanus calls ‘God’.

<sup>80</sup> He quotes Anselm on this in Sermon XX.6: *Nam hoc solum habemus per Anselmum, quod "Deus est melius quam cogitari possit". Hoc autem "melius" est innominabile, si non est cogitabile. ... Unde secundum hoc, quia "potius scimus 'quid Deus non est' quam 'quid est'": Deus ineffabilis est. Cf. Sermon XX.5: Nihil intellegimus, nisi a sensibilibus ortum capiat. Deus sic non est attingibilis; and especially Sermon XXII.16: Nomina enim per comparationem et rationem imponuntur et simplicissimo, infinito, improporionali, unissimo convenire nequeunt. Et non est possibile nobis hominibus aliquo signo, figura aut locutione attingere [Deum].*

<sup>81</sup> DDI I.1.2: *Divino munere omnibus in rebus naturale quoddam desiderium inesse conspiciamus, ut sint meliori quidem modo, quo hoc cuiusque naturae patitur conditio, atque ad hunc finem operari instrumentaque habere opportuna, quibus iudicium connatum est conveniens proposito cognoscendi, ne sit frustra appetitus et in amato pondere propriae naturae quietem attingere possit.*

<sup>82</sup> DDI I.1.4: *...profecto, cum appetitus in nobis frustra non sit, desideramus scire nos ignorare.*

<sup>83</sup> DDI I.1.4: *Hoc si ad plenum assequi poterimus, doctam ignorantiam assequemur. Nihil enim homini etiam studiosissimo in doctrina perfectius adveniet quam in ipsa ignorantia, quae sibi propria est, doctissimum reperiri; et tanto quis doctior erit, quanto se sciverit magis ignorantem.*



In the text, it is easy to recognize the S1 stage by the absence of any use of paradox and a reluctance to assert any metaphysical commitment; we know nothing with *praecisio*, we do not know anything infinite at all. Wherever a coincidence of opposites is mentioned, we are already at S2; wherever either traditional metaphysical or theological commitments are put forward, they are to be ultimately understood and justified at the S3 level and above, as will be explained below. S1 is the way of speaking which is ‘according to the regular meaning of words’ (*proprietas vocabulorum*); this, Cusanus says, we must ‘go above’ (*supra verborum vim effere*), to reach the further levels of the argument. This is because our regular words ‘cannot be properly adapted to such great intellectual mysteries (*mysteria*)’<sup>84</sup>.

## 2.2. S2 – Paradox: the coincidence of opposites

Here Cusanus examines how paradoxical expressions of all kinds can be brought into play as ways of naming what is infinite. But if we cannot know such things as ‘infinite knowledge’, ‘absolutely precise truth’, etc., we also cannot distinguish them from one another – thus, the infinite, absolute Truth, precision, any superlatives generally (anything that does not admit of ‘more’ or ‘less’) all name *one* inconceivable ‘thing’—nothing else than the ‘slippery object’ X I have discussed in section 2.1. Most strikingly, just as we saw there, Cusanus affirms that terms which we conceive of as opposite in S1 (the regular use of language), such as ‘maximum’ and ‘minimum’, are in fact the same: the maximum coincides with the minimum and vice versa – since they are all paradoxical and inconceivable they cannot be distinguished so that an opposition can be established between them<sup>85</sup>. In the

<sup>84</sup> DDI I.2.8: *Oportet autem attingere sensum volentem potius supra verborum vim intellectum efferre quam proprietatibus vocabulorum insistere, quae tantis intellectualibus mysteriis proprie adaptari non possunt. Cf. Sermon XXII.16, admonishing us to not ‘look at what the words (regularly) mean’: non respicias ad “quid nominis”, quia in “quid nominis” nihil veritatis infinitae invenies.*

<sup>85</sup> This is the recurring form of the argument Cusanus makes in several ways, using the paradigmatic examples of *maximum* and *minimum*, at I.3.11-12. The fact that his forms of argument could be classified as ‘fallacious’ in various ways misses the fundamental point of his arguments here, which is pointing to God as ‘beyond all

infinite all contraries paradoxically coincide<sup>86</sup>. (This is not different from saying that they are all inconceivable, and thus ‘they’ are simply ‘it’, X, ‘that which is inconceivable’, etc.). This one inconceivable, infinite, unknowable ‘thing’, which all paradoxical constructions (such as superlatives strictly understood) seem to ‘describe’, represents Cusanus’ notion of God.

God, as infinite and radically paradoxical, cannot be known or conceived; this is the primary fact that ‘learned ignorance’ brings from the S1 level; but this means that, in effect, any *reductio ad absurdum* of the possibility (at the S1 level) of such an ‘object’ in fact properly, although incomprehensibly, describes it. ‘The Maximum with which the Minimum coincides’ implies a contradiction understood at S1—this is precisely why at S2 this is a suitable name by which we ‘attain’ the object ‘incomprehensibly’<sup>87</sup>. This pattern recurs at every level relative to the previous ( $S_{n+1}$  relative to  $S_n$ , for any  $n$ ).

All such paradoxical ‘names’ represent knowledge about the infinite God that we have gained paradoxically. Although we can in no way imagine the ‘absolute Maximum’, which is the same as the ‘absolute Minimum’, or understand such expressions with the common way we use words (non-maximal, non-infinite, allowing for more or less), we have gained true, though incomprehensible, knowledge; in Cusanus’ words, of ‘incomprehensible things incomprehensibly’ (III.263). The systematic skepticism of S1 proves fertile: we can affirm that all ‘infinite things’ that are beyond our grasp knowledge-wise are one and the same; all paradoxical expressions are names for God.

But these paradoxical names are also not ‘ultimate’ names for God; otherwise God would be fully definable by means of them—but what is infinite, Cusanus argues, escapes

---

opposites’ and thus nameable by means of paradoxes. Cf. Hopkins, *On Learned Ignorance*, 5-6; *A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1986), 10-11.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Hopkins, *On Learned Ignorance*, 7-9, 18. For an in-depth account of the notion of ‘coincidence of opposites’ (*coincidentia oppositorum*) in Cusanus, of its history and Cusanus’ likely sources, see Haubst, *Streifzuege*, 117-141.

<sup>87</sup> DDI I.3.11: *Maximum, quo maius esse nequit, simpliciter et absolute cum maius sit, quam comprehendi per nos possit, quia est veritas infinita, non aliter quam incomprehensibiliter attingimus.*

being ‘named’ in all ways, including this one<sup>88</sup>. Thus, although the argument establishes that it is true that God is unnameable and paradoxical, God is also beyond unnameability and paradoxicality, and the method proceeds to the next level.

### 2.3. S3 – Order: God beyond *coincidentia oppositorum*; cosmic order

The paradoxical names elicited at S2 must also be overcome, as God is infinitely beyond any and all names<sup>89</sup>. Through the method Cusanus employs, God’s unnameability brings us straight to the possibility of naming God, since the name ‘unnameable’ must also be denied<sup>90</sup>, making God, paradoxically, nameable after all. At this level, the names given by ‘positive theology’, together with all the elements of the metaphysical tradition Cusanus is a part of<sup>91</sup>, can be brought in. They are not, however, asserted as if they were made at the S1 level; that would make them misguided claims to some unproblematic, non-paradoxical knowledge, which is unavailable to us. Rather, they are brought in together with an explicit reassertion of both the skepticism of S1 and the paradoxes of S2 regarding naming the infinite<sup>92</sup>. Thus, Cusanus’ task is effectively to present an internally consistent account of all the traditional elements, which he can then assert as true, although not true in any non-

<sup>88</sup> According to Cusanus, names cannot be applied to the infinite at all; thus, God in *De Docta Ignorantia* can be said to be precisely the ‘slippery object’ we have examined before: by definition indefinable. The method hinges on this. Cusanus gives a functionally equivalent formulation to my own above: “unnameably nameable”—*innominabiliter nominabile* (I.5.13).

<sup>89</sup> Cf. *DDI* I.6.17: ...*hoc nomen esse aut aliud quodcumque nomen non sit praecisum nomen maximi, quod est super omne nomen*. ‘Maximum’, as well as any other name, is thus improper. Cf. I.24.74: ...*nullum nomen ei proprie posse convenire. Omnia enim nomina ex quadam singularitate rationis, per quam discretio fit unius ab alio, imposita sunt*.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. Sermon XX.6: *Neque hoc nomen ‘innominabilis’ est nomen proprium Dei ...*

<sup>91</sup> Usually termed ‘Christian Neoplatonic’ – cf. Hudson, *Becoming God*, 195-196; Hopkins, *On Learned Ignorance*, 9-10; Miller, *Reading Cusanus*, note 51 on p.63.

<sup>92</sup> As Cusanus comments, such positive claims made without thought of ‘negative theology’ (i.e., S1 considerations) amount to idolatry. I.26.86: *ita theologia negationis adeo necessaria est quoad aliam affirmationis, ut sine illa Deus non coleretur ut Deus infinitus, sed potius ut creatura; et talis cultura idolatria est*.

paradoxically-comprehensible way. I will next present a number of paradigmatic cases showcasing the way he chooses to accomplish this in the text.

### 2.3.1. --- ‘Traditional metaphysics’ and the paradigmatic question of God’s existence

One can understand Cusanus’ method here vis-à-vis his tradition in a strikingly clear manner if we examine how Cusanus deals with the issue of God’s existence, in Chapter VI of book I of *DDI*<sup>93</sup>. Peculiarly, he uses two radically different kinds of arguments. One employs what I have defined as Cusanus’ method: the S1 considerations of God’s infinity and the consequent inappropriateness of all names, and the S2 application of *coincidentia oppositorum*. Maximum Being is no different from minimum being, i.e., non-being; in fact, they coincide. Cusanus concludes by asking: ‘therefore ... how can we rightly think that the Maximum is able to not exist?’<sup>94</sup>

But since the two propositions (‘God exists’ and ‘God does not exist’) are shown to not be opposed to each other after all, why does Cusanus end by asking the rhetorical question ‘how could it be understood’ that ‘it is possible for the maximum to not be’ – which seems to imply rather that it has been proven that God exists (i.e. and that ‘God does not exist’ is false)?<sup>95</sup> By looking carefully at his formulation and its context, it is possible to discern his intentions in making such a point. His rhetorical question has the form: ‘In what way, then, can it be understood that...?’ The importance of this formulation is made clear by the argument he employs just one paragraph above on the same issue of the ‘existence’ of

<sup>93</sup> Hopkins views this as the ‘nadir’ of *De Docta Ignorantia*, with reasoning ‘thoroughly implausible and unrigorous’ (*On Learned Ignorance*, p.9), but as he notes that at no point does Cusanus attempt what would usually be construed as a ‘proof’ of God’s existence (6). As I am arguing, his concerns are dictated by the nature of his method here, to which the arguments he presents are entirely appropriate.

<sup>94</sup> *Quomodo igitur intelligi potest maximum non esse posse, cum minime esse sit maxime esse?*

<sup>95</sup> Hopkins makes this point— *On Learned Ignorance*, note 35, p.12.

God – a very different argument from the ‘learned ignorance’-based one we have just examined:

Furthermore, nothing could exist if that which is simply Maximum did not exist. For as everything that is not Maximum is finite, it is also originated [*principiatum*]. But it is then necessary that it will exist from another [*ab alio*]. Otherwise [...] it would have existed when it did not exist. As it is obviously the case according to the rule [*ut ex regula patet*], it is not possible to proceed to infinity either in principles or in causes. Therefore that which is simply Maximum exists, without which nothing can exist<sup>96</sup>.

This is an argument from a notion of causality based on a framework of participation in Being and governed by a ‘rule’ – thus, on the broadest level, from a set of presuppositions as to an intelligible order (or metaphysical framework) of the world<sup>97</sup>. It also seems to lead towards very different conclusions from the ‘learned ignorance’-based argument we have examined. While that one implied that God could just as well be said to ‘exist’ as to ‘not exist’, this one requires us to say only that God exists, otherwise the whole intelligible order of the world with respect to causality collapses.

As one sees clearly from the way the conclusion to the ‘learned ignorance’-based argument is presented, Cusanus is operating under two very different constraints: one, employing his paradox-based method, and two, ‘censoring’ (so to speak) some of the results of the ‘learned ignorance’ method so that the ‘traditional’ argument is not invalidated and the intelligible order is preserved, i.e., so that a way still remains in which the universe *intelligi posset*, ‘can be understood’. By learned ignorance alone, Cusanus could say explicitly that we can just as well speak of God as ‘not-existing’ (as long as we recognize that it is the same as

---

<sup>96</sup> I.6-15: *Finitum vero et terminatum habet, a quo incipit et ad quod terminatur ... igitur necessario est maximum actu omnium finitorum principium et finis. Praeterea, nihil esse posset, si maximum simpliciter non esset. Nam cum omne non-maximum sit finitum, est et principiatum; erit autem necessarium, quod ab alio; alioquin, si a seipso, fuisset quando non fuisset. Nec in principiis et causis est – ut ex regula patet – possibile ire in infinitum. Erit igitur maximum simpliciter, sine quo nihil esse potest.*

<sup>97</sup> This notion of intelligible order crucially also includes the law of non-contradiction, without which the argument here would not work. It is crucial to emphasize that Cusanus’ method does not involve an ‘abandonment’ of the law, which remains in operation at each particular Sn ‘stage’ I have described. Cf. Miller, *Reading Cusanus.*, 16.

‘existing’, since in God opposites coincide, as ‘existence’ is just a limited, finite name<sup>98</sup>); yet, he is not willing to do that; rather, a standard for the appropriateness of names, derived from the underlying conception of universal order, is applied to such results. This pattern of argumentation defines the S3 level and can be found throughout *De Docta Ignorantia*, and is clearly a carefully chosen (and rhetorically balanced) approach on Cusanus’ part<sup>99</sup>. In the overall plan of the treatise Cusanus attempts to weave together two intellectual strands; one develops his method of ‘learned ignorance’; another preserves and defends, by means of and in the context of the first, a set of metaphysical assumptions about the order of the world.

What are these metaphysical assumptions? In various places in the treatise Cusanus is explicit about them. They take the form of a standard of perfection (i.e., ‘one’ is more perfect than ‘many’, simple more than complex, static rather than in motion, immaterial rather than material, atemporal rather than temporal, etc. – cf. I.7, I.18, etc.), an order of causality (as we have seen), an order of ontology (in which all particular beings have their being from Absolute Being – II.98), and a standard as to the intelligibility and order of the cosmos<sup>100</sup>. It is this standard which Cusanus implicitly uses to elaborate a (traditional) hierarchy of names for God<sup>101</sup> (which merely by ‘learned ignorance’ would arguably be equally inappropriate, or equally paradoxically appropriate), and an entire metaphysics of cosmic hierarchy in book

<sup>98</sup> He implies this, strikingly, in Sermon XIX.5, where he defines ‘what is not’ as simply ‘those things which leave behind the powers of all understanding’, which fits God perfectly: *Dico vero ‘quae sunt’, quae sive humanum sive angelicum non omnino fugiunt sensum; ‘quae’ vero ‘non sunt’ voco, quae profecto omnis intellegentiae vires relinquunt* (my translation).

<sup>99</sup> Cf. Miller, *Reading Cusanus*, 53, 63. Pace Hopkins, who is skeptical about his method and treats Cusanus as sometimes merely inconsistent (*On Learned Ignorance*, 15ff).

<sup>100</sup> These assumptions are usually referred to as Neo-Platonic, or Neoplatonism, in the literature. See Hopkins, *On Learned Ignorance*, 9, or Hudson, *Becoming God*, 14-16. For a general account of these assumptions, see the sources quoted in Miller, *Reading Cusanus*, 63 note 51. For a review of contemporary sources, particularly as to the hierarchy of being, see Edward P. Mahoney, “Metaphysical Foundations of the Hierarchy of Being According to Some Late-Medieval and Renaissance Philosophers,” in *Philosophies of Existence Ancient and Medieval*, ed. P. Morewedge (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 165-257.

<sup>101</sup> I.18.52-54. See also Sermon XX.9 and XXII.12 for explicit accounts of the hierarchy of names.

II<sup>102</sup>. The implicit need to harmonize and preserve the traditional elements at S3 while employing his new method dictates his choice of argument throughout the treatise.

The issue of defending a necessary hierarchy for the names applied to God is of great importance to Cusanus, a fact that must be emphasized, as some of his statements in the sermons he preached while writing *De Docta Ignorantia* make clear: at issue is the danger of committing the sin of blasphemy. In Sermon XXI (preached on Jan 6, either 1439 or 1440) he lays out his entirely traditional views on the matter: the blasphemer is the one who ‘assigns to God something that is not appropriate to Him, or denies that something that is appropriate to Him is appropriate,’<sup>103</sup> and blasphemy is literally the ‘greatest sin,’ and ‘worse than murder,’ rendering the offender ‘worthy of bodily and spiritual death.’<sup>104</sup> Cusanus, accepting this traditional account, is thus under great constraint to strictly define what is ‘appropriate’ to say about God; his chosen approach to the S3 issues is not just a choice but a duty for himself as a Christian.

Out of the interaction of these two intellectual ‘strands’, using the ‘traditional’ strand to provide the standards for the novel ‘learned ignorance’ strand without letting the latter destroy the notion of hierarchy (and the crucial criteria for establishing which names for God are to be deemed ‘appropriate’) that the first one provides, the complex structure of *De Docta Ignorantia* comes to light – a structure which can otherwise seem puzzling in its apparent

---

<sup>102</sup> It must be emphasized that this S3 hierarchy is always in Cusanus’ arguments, implicitly understood as paradoxical, not as a mere claim to ‘objective’ knowledge about the nature of things; S1 and S2 are always presupposed in the background of all such assertions. See Miller, *Reading Cusanus*, 18. Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues*, 100, refers to this as an effective ‘dehierarchization’ (*Enthierarchisierung*) of the cosmos. Hudson argues the same in *Becoming God*, 73.

<sup>103</sup> Sermon XXI.14: ... *blasphemus, qui attribuit Deo, quod ei non convenit, vel negat ei convenire, quod convenit* ... (my translation). Cusanus is quoting here a passage from Guilelmus Peraldus’ *Summa Vitiorum*—see the note to the passage in the Heidelberg Academy critical edition.

<sup>104</sup> Sermon XXI.14: [*blasphemia*] *est maximum peccatum ... maius peccatum quam homicidium ... blasphemus est dignus morte corporali et spirituali* (my translation).

internal inconsistencies, but, with the distinctions I have made, can be understood more clearly as a well-planned whole<sup>105</sup>.

### 2.3.2. --- Paradoxically positive relations

This is why Cusanus can reiterate all the S1 and S2 conclusions and yet add some traditional assertions that seem at first to be in conflict with them: ‘visible things are truly images of invisible things and ... from created things the Creator can be seen as in a mirror and in an *aenigma*’(I.30)<sup>106</sup>; ‘spiritual matters (which are unattainable for us in themselves) are investigated symbolically [*symbolice*]’(I.30)<sup>107</sup>; ‘the pathway for approaching divine matters [*ad divina accedendi*] is opened for us only through symbols [*symbola*]’(I.32)<sup>108</sup>; and it is possible to ‘use finite things as a pattern [*pro exemplo*] for ascending [*ascendendi*] to the unqualifiedly Maximum’(I.33)<sup>109</sup>.

But how, after developing S1 and S2, can one say that a finite thing is the ‘image’ of an infinite thing<sup>110</sup>? He claims this is justified because ‘all things have a certain *proportion* to one another, though hidden and incomprehensible for us, so that from out of all things there arises one universe, and in one Maximum all things are this [Maximum]’, and ‘although every image seems to be like its exemplar, nevertheless ... no image is so similar or equal to its exemplar that it cannot be infinitely more similar and equal’ (I.30)<sup>111</sup>. Thus there are two

<sup>105</sup> For a fundamentally similar interpretation of the structure of *De Docta Ignorantia*, see, e.g., Hudson, *Becoming God*, 58; pace Hopkins, *On Learned Ignorance*, 18.

<sup>106</sup> DDI I.11.30: *Visibilia veraciter invisibilium imagines esseat que creatorem ita cognoscibiliter a creaturis videri posse quasi in speculo et in aenigmate.*

<sup>107</sup> Cf. also DDI I.33: *...ipsum symbolice investigare proponimus.*

<sup>108</sup> DDI I.11.32: *...ad divina non nisi per symbola accedendi nobis via pateat.*

<sup>109</sup> DDI I.12.33: *...si finitis uti pro exemplo voluerimus ad maximum simpliciter ascendendi...*

<sup>110</sup> For an in-depth treatment of this issue in *De Docta Ignorantia* and in Cusanus’ metaphysics more generally, see Elizabeth Brient, “How can the infinite be the measure of the finite?,” in *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*, ed. Peter Casarella (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 210-225.

<sup>111</sup> DDI I.11.30: *...quoniam omnia ad se invicem quandam – nobis tamen occultam et incomprehensibilem – habent proportionem, ut ex omnibus unum exurgat universum et omnia in uno maximo sint ipsum unum. Et quamvis omnis imago accedere videatur ad similitudinem exemplaris: tamen praeter maximam imaginem, quae est hoc ipsum quod exemplar in unitate naturae, non est imago adeo similis autae qualis exemplari, quin per infinitum similior et aequalior esse possit.* On this issue see also Hudson, *Becoming God*, 33-38.



kinds of relationships – between created, i.e., non-infinite things, there is *proportio* (even if we cannot know it precisely, as at S1 it was established we cannot know anything that way), whereas between ‘exemplar’ and ‘image’ (thus also between Creator and creation) there is the different (paradoxical, unknowable) relationship of ‘being-an-image’. Thus, Cusanus introduces the notion of the *universum*, i.e., the whole of creation, which is not infinite in the manner of God but infinite ‘privatively’, i.e., it is not bounded by anything (one could say ‘indefinitely extended’), and is as such a ‘contracted Maximum’<sup>112</sup>. All things are thus ‘images’ of God, and all things are proportionally related among them. And if the radical difference between what is finite and what is infinite (marked by an absence of *proportio* between them) can be described by this new term of ‘image’ (which Cusanus describes as characterized by a radically different, and unexplained, type of *proportio*: a *transsumptiva proportio*, ‘symbolical comparative relation’ in Hopkins’ translation–I.31), we can ‘reverse-engineer’ that which any simple object of the type A is an ‘image’ of, i.e., an infinite A (that is both infinite and also an A, and thus is both paradoxical and non-paradoxical – something which precisely overcomes the solely paradoxical naming of S2) and then apply the analogy of the relationship between A and the exemplar-of-A (or, otherwise put, the Platonic-style ‘Idea’ of A) to the relationship between God and the created world. (The analogy holds non-problematically, since as Cusanus established ever since S1, there cannot be two distinct ‘Infinities’ as we could not distinguish between them – thus the exemplar-of-A or Idea-of-A is not distinct from God).

Although any kind of object works as ‘A’, Cusanus argues it is best (or at least paradigmatic) to use geometrical objects – simply because, being ‘more abstract’, they are ‘very fixed and very certain to us’<sup>113</sup>, compared to the ‘instability’ of sensible objects. At I.33

<sup>112</sup> *Contractio* in Cusanus means a limitation (usually of something infinite) by, and to, something non-infinite, in this case plurality. See, e.g., Hopkins, *De Docta Ignorantia*, 16-17.

<sup>113</sup> *DDI* I.11.31: *Sunt autem omnia sensibilia in quadam continua instabilitate propter possibilitatem materialem in ipsis habundantem. Abstractiora autem istis, ubi de rebus consideration habetur, non ut appendicitis*

he describes his specific method for deriving S3 names from geometrical figures<sup>114</sup>. It has three distinct steps: (1) ‘it is first necessary to consider finite mathematical figures with their characteristics and relations [*cum suis passionibus et rationibus*]’; (2) to ‘transfer those relations correspondently to infinite figures of that kind [*ad infinitas tales figuras transferre*]’; (3) to ‘transpose those relations of the infinite figures, in a yet higher manner, to the simple, most absolute Infinite, removed from all figure’.

The first step is to establish the *rationes* of the figures to be used. By this Cusanus means that which defines a certain kind of figure: i.e., a triangle has three angles and three sides; a line has length; a circle has a circumference and a diameter, etc. In the second step, one ‘constructs’ an infinite figure, i.e., a figure which has all the elements that define such a kind of figure, but which are all infinite; otherwise put, wherever we would have any element of the figure which ordinarily could be greater or lesser, such as the length of a triangle’s side or the measure of an angle, we take it as being infinite. At this point we examine what consequences follow, deriving the necessary (and paradoxical) consequences of the ways of speaking about something infinite that we investigated at S2, i.e., *coincidentia oppositorum* in the Infinite. There is only one infinite thing (and thus the sides and angles of an infinite triangle are not distinct; also, all infinite figures, line, triangle, circle, sphere, are one and the same thing, and are in fact identical with the Maximum, God). In the infinite, quantitatively opposed predicates coincide (i.e., the coincidence of opposites; thus the maximum length is no different than the minimum length, etc.). At this second step already we are deducing new modes of speaking which can be directly applied to God (due to the identity of all infinities) –

---

*materialibus, sine quibus imaginary nequeunt, penitus careant neque penitus possibilitati fluctuanti subsint, firmissima videmus atque nobis certissima, ut sunt ipsa mathematicalia. DDI I.11.32: ...mathematicalibus signis propter ipsorum incorruptibilem certitudinem convenientius uti poterimus.*

<sup>114</sup> For an excellent in-depth and mathematically informed account of Cusanus’ method of employing geometrical illustrations to derive S3 names for God, see Elizabeth Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite: Hans Blumenberg and the Threshold to Modernity* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2002), 188-200.

this is how Cusanus elaborates his theory of the Trinity<sup>115</sup>, for example. Then at the third step we examine the relationships between the paradoxical language we have derived at the second step (e.g., the properties of the infinite triangle as related to a regular triangle) in order to discover by analogy more ways of speaking about the relationship between God (the unqualified Infinite) and any particular created being. Thus, if we can deduce satisfactorily that, e.g., an infinite triangle is the ‘essence’ (or, in a Platonic-like fashion, ‘Idea’) of a particular triangle, or the ‘measure’, or the ‘exemplar’, or ‘cause’, or any other type of relationship we want to examine, we can also transfer the language about the relationship to the one between God and any particular created thing. This is not to say that God becomes less infinite, unnameable, and beyond comprehension; these relationships we derive do not have much ‘positive content’ that we can know; nothing like *analogia entis* is possible<sup>116</sup>. Thus, Cusanus spends a number of chapters at the beginning of book II emphasizing, by rhetorical questions, that ‘creation’, ‘contraction’, ‘contingency’ as the reason for hierarchy, etc. cannot be understood at all. He means to argue, however, that we should still apply these names and that (even in this ‘content-less’ S3 form) they are a valid application of the traditional language, which can thus be introduced and used alongside the negative formulations of S1 and the paradoxical formulations of S2<sup>117</sup>.

### 2.3.3. --- The issue of God’s Trinity

The question of God’s trinity is a crucial application of the methodological principles I have just outlined as operative in *De Docta Ignorantia*, in particular at what I have called the S3 level. We can also understand, due to characteristics of S3, how it is possible for Cusanus to assert his trinitarianism at the same time as stating that “God is infinitely beyond

<sup>115</sup> For a thorough commentary on Cusanus’ doctrine of the Trinity, see Haubst, *Streifzuege*, chapter IX, 255-302.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. Hudson, *Becoming God*, 149.

all trinity”<sup>118</sup>; this is the same for all paradoxical positive names elicited at S3. He provides a number of proofs for how we can think of God as trinity, paradoxically both one and three, which coincide in the infinite<sup>119</sup>. Many involve various kinds of triads—Cusanus’ preferred one is *unitas-aequalitas-connexio*; the most striking is the illustration of the infinite triangle. The justification for God’s trinity as necessary, however, comes from S3 considerations of intelligibility of the universal order connected to the ‘threefold nature’ of things<sup>120</sup>.

The issue of why in Cusanus’ view we find ‘three’ in God and not also four, five, etc. shows most strikingly his S3 methodology in action<sup>121</sup>. Cusanus provides a fundamentally inconclusive reason, that a triangle is the ‘minimum’ of polygons, thus also their ‘maximum’, and thus a ‘maximum quadrangle’ involves a contradiction. Yet he does not at all argue why planar polygonal figures would be the only paradigmatic illustration to be applied in this context<sup>122</sup>. In fact, Cusanus strikingly provides, in the next paragraph, a strong argument for thinking of God as ‘four-in-one’: the fourfold sequence of infinite line, infinite triangle, infinite circle, infinite sphere, which we must use, he argues, in order to be able to speak of God intelligibly as the ‘measure’ of all possible types of things<sup>123</sup>. His reasoning for this is

<sup>117</sup> On this see also Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues*, 98-99, who develops a similar account but using different terms.

<sup>118</sup> *DDI* I.20.61: ...*licet [Deus] sit super omnem trinitatem per infinitum...*

<sup>119</sup> *DDI* I.20.59 – “*triunitas*”

<sup>120</sup> *DDI* I.10.28-29, I.20.61. Cf. Sermon XXII.17-19. Cusanus’ main sources for the ‘threeness’ arguments are Augustine and Thierry of Chartres. David Albertson in *Mathematical Theologies* gives an extensive account of the intellectual influence of Thierry of Chartres and his school on Cusanus. See also Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues*, 114-116.

<sup>121</sup> *DDI* I.20.60.

<sup>122</sup> Cusanus is selective with his geometrical examples throughout, using only those that support the point he is currently arguing for, leaving unacknowledged the other possible illustrations which would undermine it, in an effort to build a consistent system of illustrations. This leads him to avoid certain geometrical objects almost entirely: notably the point, all stereoscopic figures beside the sphere, all polyhedra, etc.

<sup>123</sup> Interestingly, in Sermon XXII (preached on Christmas day, 1440, after the completion of *DDI*) he provides a different account, in which God is, because of being the ‘measure of all things,’ triune, from the triad ‘*longum, latum, profundum*’: *magnitudo sine trinitate non est, ut videmus in contracta magnitudine ad molem corpoream, quoniam non est corpus <nisi> longum, latum et profundum, et principium figurarum polygoniarum est triangulus, antequam non est possibilis figura etc. –, hinc necessario invenit ratio, quod primum principium omnium debet esse unum et trinum incomposite, sed simplicissime, ut sit omnium principium, metrum et mensura* (Sermon XXII.14). From the perspective of his ‘learned ignorance’ method, all these accounts (threeness, fourness, etc.) would be equally valid; the difference lies in how well they fit with the S3 principles of hierarchy.

strikingly similar to his reasoning on why God's trinity preserves the intelligibility of the world, presented immediately after:

... if we wanted to conceive of the measures of all measurable quantities ... because all these [four] measures would have to be infinite and maximum measures, with which the minimum would coincide, and since there cannot be more than one maximum: we say that the one maximum, which is supposed to be the measure of all quantities, is those [four] things without which it could not be the maximum measure. Yet, considered in itself, without relation to what is measurable, it neither is nor can be truly called any of these things; rather, it is infinitely and disproportionally above them.

By comparison, then, since the unqualifiedly Maximum is the measure of everything, we predicate of it those attributes without which we do not consider it to be able to be the measure of everything. Hence, although the Maximum is infinitely above all trinity, we call it trine; for otherwise we would not be considering it to be the simple Cause and Measure of the things whose oneness of being is a trinity—even as, with regard to figures, triangular oneness consists of a trinity of angles. Yet, in truth: if this consideration is eliminated, then neither the name “trinity” nor our concept of trinity at all befit the Maximum; rather, [the name and the concept] fall infinitely short of this maximal and incomprehensible Truth.<sup>124</sup>

Yet Cusanus in no way acknowledges that one could say he has just provided us with a proof that God, considered as measure of all things, is ‘four-in-one’. Within the framework he assumes his statements cannot function in this way, as one of the S3 principles as to a hierarchy of perfection is that fourness or fiveness, etc., would be ‘inconsistent with the simplicity and perfection of the Maximum’. The hierarchy must be maintained; thus, God's ‘fourness’ will not be mentioned, whereas Trinity must be emphasized. According to the

---

<sup>124</sup> I.20.61: ... ipsum unicum maximum, quod esse debet omnium quantorum mensura, dicimus esse illa, sine quibus maxima mensura esse non posset, licet in se consideratum – absque respectu ad mensurabilia – nullum istorum sit aut dici possit veraciter, sed per infinitum et improportionabiliter supra. Ita maximum simpliciter cum sit omnium mensura, ipsum illa esse dicimus, sine quibus ipsum omnium metrum posse esse non intelligimus. Unde maximum, licet sit super omnem trinitatem per infinitum, trinum dicimus, quia aliter ipsum rerum, quarum unitas essendi est trinitas – sicut in figuris unitas triangularis in trinitate angulorum consistit –, causam simplicem, metrum et mensuram esse non intelligeremus; licet in veritate et nomen et conceptus noster trinitatis, semoto isto respectu, maximo nequaquam conveniat, sed per infinitum ab illa maxima et incomprehensibili veritate deficiat.

methodology he applies at the S3 level, he is not unjustified or intellectually dishonest, but rather perfectly consistent in doing this<sup>125</sup>.

#### 2.3.4. --- Corollaries to S3

Cusanus thus builds at what we have called the S3 level an ordered, hierarchical image of the world, where the principles he has inherited from his tradition all apply. However, this does not at all mean that such principles, such as ‘everything must have a cause’, or ‘there is a hierarchy of perfection ordering all things’, apply in the simple S1 meaning one could grant them; or that, while true, their ‘content’ is intelligible to us, since it comes together with the implicit skepticism of S1 and paradoxical terms of S2.

This is also the reason for the profuse use of rhetorical questions in Book II; Cusanus gives questions of the basic form: “Who can understand how X is the case?” or “How can X be understood?,” where X is one or another of the S3 propositions he has ‘proved’ true<sup>126</sup>. He only answers some of these questions, and then only by introducing new terminology that does not bring any more positive content<sup>127</sup>. This allows him to preserve traditional notions as S3 considerations, and make them very difficult to attack, while removing from them the simple intelligibility they might have had as S1 statements. This movement of thought, preserving traditional assertions from the possible attack of S1 skepticism as S3 statements,

---

<sup>125</sup> The argument that he would be ‘wrong’ in doing this is difficult to make, if possible at all. By definition all opposites paradoxically coincide in God; thus, threeness coinciding with fourness does not, as it were, add any more paradox to what is already implicit in Cusanus’ account of God. He is concerned, however, to limit the argument to only some of these paradoxes so as not to make the standard of ‘perfection’ he is employing appear problematic—arguably a rhetorical move to avoid emphasizing its radical paradoxicality.

<sup>126</sup> *DDI* II.2.98-II.3.111. Recurring patterns of questions here are *quomodo potest intelligi* and *quis potest intelligere*, to which the implicit answer is an unstated *nemo*; all the questions pertain to the fundamental issue of how plurality, multiplicity, mutability, temporality, etc. can arise out of oneness, immutability, eternity, etc., i.e., the possibility of an S3 ordered hierarchy of perfections.

<sup>127</sup> Such is *contingentia* as the ultimate reason for plurality, multiplicity, etc., as Hopkins rightfully points out—*On Learned Ignorance*, 21-22.

gives the structure of book II, which opens with an S1 criticism of the *quadrivium* and closes with an S3 affirmation of its value as having been “used by God”<sup>128</sup>.

## 2.4. S4 – Paradox: the Incarnation in Christ

Christ is the object asserted to be impossible at S3: one particular finite entity which is also infinite, a ‘contracted maximum’ (*maximum contractum*). The coincidence of opposites is thus applied again to take us to the next stage as I have defined them: in this respect, just as S2 is to S1, so S4 is to S3. The figure of the divine-human Christ is thus paradigmatic for Cusanus’ method and its application—a theme treated extensively and insightfully in the scholarship<sup>129</sup>. What needs to be emphasized is Cusanus’ orthodoxy, which in fact results from the proper application of Cusanus’ method: Christ is fully God and fully man, as the coincidence of opposites fits precisely with the orthodox Chalcedonian formula<sup>130</sup>.

### 2.4.1. --- Human nature as a microcosm

A crucial question which shows the same fundamental pattern as his treatment of the question of God’s Trinity and ‘fourness’ above, revealing Cusanus’ method, is the issue of why Christ as *contracted maximum* has to be one particular human being. This is an argument Cusanus makes in Chapter 3 of book III. What is striking, though not at all unexpected, is that he uses exclusively S3 principles (as I have examined them above) to argue for the conclusion that ‘only in human nature is such a maximum possible’. He gives a strong

<sup>128</sup> *DDI* II.13.175. See Moffit-Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus*, 72-73.

<sup>129</sup> Most commentators agree on Christ’s prominent role in Cusanus’ thought for this reason. See, e.g., Miller, *Reading Cusanus*, 50-67; Hudson, *Becoming God*, 137-143; Bond, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, 35; Bond, “Nicholas of Cusa and the Reconstruction of Christology: The Centrality of Christology in the Coincidence of Opposites,” in *Contemporary Reflections on the Medieval Christian Tradition*, ed. G. H. Shriver (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1974), 81-94.

formulation of the S3 principle of hierarchy that he has been developing<sup>131</sup> featuring ‘higher’, ‘lower’ and ‘middle’ natures, and states that:

if Absolute Maximality is in the most universal way the Being of all things, so that it is not more of one thing than of another: clearly, that being which is more common to the totality of beings is more uniteable [*magis sociabile*] with the [Absolute] Maximum. (III.3.195)

...  
it befits the Maximum—with which the Minimum coincides—to embrace one thing in such way that it does not repel another thing but is all things together (III.3.197)

He concludes this nature is human nature, which is a ‘middle nature’ which ‘enfolds within itself all natures’, i.e., ‘intellectual and sensible natures’<sup>132</sup>; it is a ‘microcosm’<sup>133</sup>. But the sense of ‘enfolding’ (*complicatio*) here is not the technical one used in book II – rather, it is a merely metaphorical use, apparently meaning ‘sharing common traits’<sup>134</sup>.

Why indeed could another paradoxical thing not be *maximum contractum* – such as an infinite line? Cusanus takes up this question in III.3.196; an infinite line would effectively ‘be’ both a line and, at the same time, God, and thus:

would be, actually, everything which a line can become. But a line does not include [the possibility of] life or intellect. Therefore, if the line would not attain to the fullness of [all] natures, how could it be elevated to the maximum gradation [*gradus*]? For it would be a maximum which could be greater and which would lack [some] perfections.<sup>135</sup>

<sup>130</sup> On Cusanus’ orthodoxy and defenses against various charges of heresy imputed to him from Wenck on, see, e.g., Hudson, *Becoming God*, 171, 184, 197, Hopkins, *De Docta Ignorantia*, 34-45, Haubst, *Streifzuege*, 1-77.

<sup>131</sup> DDI III.3.195: ...*manifestum est ordinem rerum necessario deponere, ut quaedam res sint inferioris naturae comparatione aliorum, ut sunt ipsae, quae carent vita et intelligentia, quaedam superioris naturae, quae sunt intelligentiae, ac quaedam mediae.*

<sup>132</sup> DDI III.3.197-198: *natura media ... ipsa intra se complicit omnes naturas ... intellectualem et sensibilem naturam complicans ac universa intra se constringens, ut microcosmos aut parvus mundus a veteribus rationabiliter vocitetur.* Cf. Sermon XXII.32-33 where he formulates the same argument using exclusively *complicatio* and *complicare*: the *humana natura* is ‘*in se ut medium alias complicans*’, ‘*inter naturas creatas homo ratione universalitatis omnes complectitur*’; *spiritus hominis ... intra se complicit universorum naturas...*

<sup>133</sup> This is a notion prominent in the Neoplatonic tradition; see Hudson, *Becoming God*, 151.

<sup>134</sup> Miller, *Reading Cusanus*, 58-59.

<sup>135</sup> DDI III.3.196: *ita erit actu omne id, quod ex linea fieri potest. Linea autem non includit neque vitam neque intellectum. Quomodo ergo linea ad ipsum maximum gradum poterit assumi, si plenitudinem naturarum non attingit? Esset enim maximum, quod maius esse posset, et perfectionibus careret.* See also Hopkins, *De Docta Ignorantia*, 40-41, for a similar reading.



His argument turns on the rhetorical question which can be reformulated as: In what way could we still claim the world is intelligible if a line was also, literally, God (by analogy with the Christian claim, ‘if God were to be ‘incarnate’ in a line’)? We can see that here, too, Cusanus’ overriding concern with preserving intelligible universal harmony at S3 is manifested. The reason why God can be said to be incarnate only in one human being and in no other thing is that otherwise the intelligibility of the S3 world order according to the hierarchy of ‘perfection’ would be lost<sup>136</sup>. Using the ‘learned ignorance’ method alone one would have no such limitation; anything could serve as the paradoxical coincidence of S3 opposites leading to the S4 stage, including a line; Cusanus’ criteria of ‘uniteability’ to God (*sociabilitas*) are exclusively S3. A hypothetical opponent could presumably argue here, using Cusanus’ own method but not his S3 presuppositions, that God in fact became not only a man but (also) a line or any other particular thing, and could answer Cusanus’ rhetorical question just as Cusanus himself answers his own similar rhetorical questions while developing his S3 cosmology in Book II: this is possible in an incomprehensible manner (*incomprehensibiliter*). Cusanus is concerned to avoid this here to preserve the S3 framework of intelligibility—thus he denies that an infinite line can exist ‘actually’ (*actu*)<sup>137</sup>.

#### 2.4.2. --- The image of inscribed polygon and circle revisited

As noted above, Cusanus used the image of a circle being indefinitely approximated by a polygon inscribed in it with an indefinitely increasing number of angles as a skeptical illustration of the impossibility of attaining perfect knowledge at the S1 level, in I.3. The exact same image now recurs here at S4, with the erstwhile impossibility now figuring the reality of the *coincidentia* in Christ:

<sup>136</sup> *DDI* III.8.230, where Cusanus argues that the universe ‘would not even be a universe’ (*nec universum esset*) without the hierarchy with humanity as *natura media*.

By way of illustration: Assume that a polygon inscribed in a circle were the human nature and the circle were the divine nature. Then, if the polygon were to be a maximum polygon, than which there cannot be a greater polygon, it would exist not through itself with finite angles but in the circular shape. Thus, it would not have its own shape for existing—[i.e., it would not have a shape which was] even conceivably separable from the circular and eternal shape.<sup>138</sup>

‘If the polygon were to be a maximum polygon’ was not an option in book I, ch.3, where the level of argument was S1. This recurrence of the same illustration with radically changed meaning is perhaps the best illustration for the movement of thought I have described as Cusanus’ method, programmatically defining impossibilities at previous stages then overcoming them in paradoxical assertion of a *coincidentia oppositorum* at a later stage<sup>139</sup>.

## 2.5. S5 – Order: The Church

Continuing the parallel, S5 is to S4 and S3 just as S3 is to S2 and S1; a re-ordering of the cosmos due to the assertion of paradox at the previous level within a prior order. Christ ‘repositions’ the cosmic hierarchy, under the form of the Church<sup>140</sup> as a union of the believers with Christ. The new cosmic order comes with a new account of ‘perfection’ (similarity to Christ) and participation (this similarity is nothing else than participation in humanity as such, which is Christ). This is a reordering of the whole cosmos, since animals, plants, etc. are also said to participate, through the medium of the human microcosm, in the new order<sup>141</sup>.

<sup>137</sup> Such a line, if asserted to exist, would be such an ‘Incarnation’ of God; so would any of the hypothetical infinite geometrical figures that Cusanus used to develop S3 names.

<sup>138</sup> DDI III.4.206: *Quasi ut si polygonia circulo inscripta natura foret humana, et circulus divina: si ipsa / polygonia maxima esse debet, qua maior esse non potest, nequaquam in finitis angulis per se subsisteret, sed in circulari figura, ita ut non haberet propriam subsistendi figuram, etiam intellectualiter ab ipsa circulari et aeterna figura separabilem.*

<sup>139</sup> Reusing this image for apparently contradictory purposes has prompted some commentators, such as Hopkins, to accuse Cusanus of inconsistency (Hopkins, *De Docta Ignorantia*, 42). Others, in agreement with my reading, point out the intentional nature of Cusanus’ paradoxical construction and how it fits precisely within his systematic application of *coincidentia oppositorum*—e.g., Miller, *Reading Cusanus*, 64.

<sup>140</sup> Cf. Miller, *Reading Cusanus*, 58–64, esp. 60; Bond, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, 34–35.

<sup>141</sup> DDI III.3.195–198.

The new hierarchy requires a new principle of order; this is the degree of union with Christ ‘by faith formed by love’, *fides formata*, which ‘ranks’ those in the Church according to degrees (*gradus*) of more or less<sup>142</sup>. The attainment of maximum faith is not possible in this life, as a ‘pilgrim’ (*viator*), but in the next one, as ‘one who knows’ (*comprehensor* – at S6, the next stage). Only Christ has (and is identical with) this maximum faith<sup>143</sup>; believers are called to progress ‘from degree to degree’ (*de gradu ad gradum*).

## 2.6. S6 – Paradox: The Resurrection

This next level is signaled whenever Cusanus, in the context of the Church, mentions the afterlife: in this life we see God ‘in a mirror and symbolism’, in the next we see Him ‘face to face’<sup>144</sup>; in this life it is impossible to have perfect faith (and thus ‘quantified faith’ determines a hierarchy), in the afterlife such perfect faith will be had<sup>145</sup>. Humans’ mode of existence will be radically different ‘there’<sup>146</sup>. This is a cosmic phenomenon as well; in his application of the microcosm-theory Cusanus argues that in the resurrection of human beings the ‘nature of all intermediary things is complete’ so that, e.g., animals do not have to rise from the dead as well<sup>147</sup>.

<sup>142</sup> DDI III.6.219: *Unum sunt cum [Christi], salva differentia graduum meriti, secundum differentiam graduum unionis cuiusque cum ipso per fidem caritate formatam*; III.11.245: *Potest autem Christi sanissima fides, in simplicitate constanter firmata, gradibus ascensionum extendi et explicari secundum datam ignorantiae doctrinam*; III.11.249: *...fides unius hominis ad gradum alterius non attingit propter impossibilitatem aequalitatis*.

<sup>143</sup> DDI III.11.248: *...et in fide, quae simpliciter maxima in esse et posse; non potest in viatore esse, qui non sit et comprehensor simul, qualis Iesus fuit*. See also III.12.254,255.

<sup>144</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians.13:12: ‘For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.’ (New International Version)

<sup>145</sup> DDI III.12.254.

<sup>146</sup> E.g. III.7.220: *...animale mortale corpus fieret spirituale incorruptibile*. III.10.242: *supra omnem motum et tempus et quantitatem et cetera tempori subdita resurrectio hominum est, ita quod corruptibile in incorruptibile, animale in spirituale resolvitur, ut totus homo sit suus intellectus, qui est spiritus, et corpus verum sit in spiritu absorptum, ut non sit corpus in se, quasi in suis corporalibus quantificativis et temporalibus proportionibus, sed translatum in spiritum*.

<sup>147</sup> III.8.230

In this, the Church becomes, so to speak, infinitely more united to Christ than before. Cusanus uses the metaphor of fire to signify the effecting of this radical new union in the Last Judgment (III.9.234-6). The parallelism of the method is preserved; contradictories are only found separately in the world (S1) but united in God (S2), God and creatures are distinct in the world (S3) but united in Christ (S4); God and Church are distinct in this age (S5), united in the next (S6). The form of the argument is the same as that which established Christ as paradoxical *maximum contractum* at S4, the order at the previous level. Yet not even this union is ‘ultimate’ in any simply final sense<sup>148</sup>, as is evident in the presence of the next stages.

## 2.7. S7 – Order: the Church Triumphant in the afterlife

This is the necessary correlate to the previous stage, where paradox was introduced; here the world is reorganized according to it, just as at S3 and S5. The Church is still a union of individual human beings with Christ, no longer as *viatores* but as *comprehensores*. This is the ‘greatest union that can be conceived’, the maximal union, without confounding the individual humanities.<sup>149</sup> They each experience God in their own distinct particular manner (*gradus* – with crucially different meaning than in its use as ordering principle at S5)<sup>150</sup>.

<sup>148</sup> Or, better put: they are ultimate (since the promises of the Scriptures are upheld), yet beyond them there are things even more ultimate than ultimate, infinitely above ultimate, etc.

<sup>149</sup> III.12.255 *Omnes enim, qui Christo aut per fidem in hac vita et caritatem aut comprehensionem et fruitionem in alia uniuntur, remanente graduali differentia eo modo uniuntur, quo magis illa remanente differentia uniri non possent, ita ut in se nemo absque ipsa unione subsistat et per unionem a gradu suo non cadat*; III.12.262 *Unio autem ecclesiae est maxima unio ecclesiastica*; III.12.261 *Nec potest ecclesia esse alio modo magis una. Nam ecclesia unitatem plurium, salva cuiusque personali veritate, dicit absque confusione naturarum et graduum. Quanto autem ecclesia magis est una, tanto maior. Ista igitur ecclesia est maxima, ecclesia aeternaliter triumphantium, quoniam maior ecclesiae unio possibilis non est.*

<sup>150</sup> III.9.234: *...omnia tamen transformata in ignem videntur, licet quodlibet in gradu suo ...*; cf III.12.262.

## 2.8. S8 – Paradox: Infinite God

Although the union of the blessed with Christ and God is already ‘maximal’ (III.12.260-261), this is not the final step of the application of Cusanus’ method, as indeed no such step is possible. We find the continuation of the progression in a few brief sentences in which Cusanus treats the infinity of ‘intellectual life’ enjoyed by the blessed in III.12.258. The nature of this life is to ‘enter further and further into life and joy. And since that life is infinite: the blessed, still desirous, are brought further and further into it’<sup>151</sup>. Drinking ‘from the fount of Life’, while ‘the desire-for-living always increases’, they ‘are ever drinking and ever filled; and yet, they have never drunk and have never been filled.’<sup>152</sup> The paradoxically recursive formulation at the end shows that this is an account of continuous paradoxical progress into the revelation of God himself, even within the context of the already-achieved ‘maximal union’. Beyond each new revelation of God is another radically new revelation.

## 2.9. S9 – The blessed in an ever-new relation to God’s infinity

This stage comes up in the form of the plural nouns and verbs at S8 (whereas S8 proper would only apply to the statements about *vita intellectualis* and *fons vitae*). The multiplicity of those partaking in the continuous revelations is preserved (while we know from S7 that the differences in *gradus* remain).

<sup>151</sup> III.12.258: ‘*intellectualiter vivere, hoc est continue plus in vitam et gaudium intrare. Et quoniam illa infinita est, continue in ipsam beati cum desiderio feruntur. Satiantur itaque quasi sitientes de fonte vitae potantes; et quia ista potatio non transit in praeteritum, cum sit in aeternitate, semper sunt beati potantes et semper satiantur, et numquam biberunt aut saturati fuerunt.*

<sup>152</sup> III.12.259: *fruitio [optimi maximi boni] non transit in praeteritum, quia appetitus in fruitione non decrescit ... Haec est igitur capacitas naturae intellectualis, ut recipiendo in se vitam in ipsam convertatur secundum suam naturam convertibilem.*

### 2.10. $S_n, S_{n+1}$ – for ‘n’ progressing to infinity

The recursive character of the formula: ‘are ever drinking and ever filled; and yet, they have never drunk and have never been filled’ sets the pattern for the continuing infinite series, which preserves, and adds continuously to, all the previous stages. This is an application and straightforward illustration of the formula I have described as  $S_n$  to  $S_{n+1}$ , the basic general pattern of the method’s progression.

### 3. Corollaries

The application of what I have defined as Cusanus’ method has yielded a systematic account of the treatise as an ordered whole and proposed interesting solutions for a number of contentious issues. The recurrence of the same general pattern of thought through the stages of his argument makes it thus plausible to assert that Cusanus had such a simple fundamental schema in mind while constructing his large-scale systematic treatment of the core themes of the Christian tradition. It is an innovative project precisely due to this unified method of systematically constructing overlapping levels of paradox. The expression in the title, *docta ignorantia*, points to this method; ‘learned ignorance’ is also meant as a coincidence of opposites, a *coincidentia oppositorum*, pointing further to Christ, the union of the human and the divine, the infinite and finite, both defined as radically unbridgeable, who is the paradigmatic case for the method itself<sup>153</sup>.

Cusanus argues that Christian discourse without paradox being at least implicit among its presuppositions is not truly Christian<sup>154</sup>. This is an aspect of the tradition which is worth emphasizing—particularly since it made possible the kind of method Cusanus developed. No matter its degree of systematization, orthodox Christian theology, both Eastern and Western,

<sup>153</sup> Offerman, *Christus, Wahrheit des Denkens* (Muenster: Aschendorff, 1991) also argues for an overarching Christological reading of *DDI*.

had to fundamentally come to grips with Christ, paradoxically defined as both divine and human. This has been variously acknowledged in modern scholarship on the tradition. Jaroslav Pelikan wrote a history of the Church based on the notion of preserving paradox, which is ultimately, in this mode of explanation, the crucial difference between orthodoxy and heresy<sup>155</sup>.

In the context of the High Middle Ages, as Caroline Bynum argues in *Christian Materiality*<sup>156</sup>, paradoxical claims about God becoming manifest, indeed ‘incarnate’, in relics, devotional and miraculous objects, were widespread in the Western tradition, particularly on the level of popular piety—so much, indeed, that a paradigmatic case Bynum describes is that of Cusanus in his function as bishop attempting to forbid pilgrimages to one of the miraculous objects, the ‘bleeding hosts of Wilsnack’, in 1451<sup>157</sup>. Rather than—as Bynum suggests—indicting him for closed-mindedness in approaching some varieties of religious experience, this episode can be interpreted to reflect an overall approach of a similar nature to what I have examined as Nicholas’s S3 methodology: a project of reconciling the paradoxical elements of the tradition according to clear rules and attempting to preserve the intelligibility of traditionally received language, which would have led him as bishop to reject novel Eucharistic (even ‘Incarnational’) phenomena of popular piety. *De Docta Ignorantia* appears to be his attempt towards establishing the same fundamental goal on a theoretical level by means of the new method I have investigated—a systematic, paradox-centered inductive scheme.

My remaining task is to investigate the possibility of a fundamentally similar scheme (in its focus on paradox and systematic goals) having been used by Masaccio and his likely collaborators Brunelleschi and Alessio Strozzi, a little more than 10 years earlier, to create

---

<sup>154</sup> E.g., I.26.86.

<sup>155</sup> Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*.

<sup>156</sup> Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 267-273.

<sup>157</sup> Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 16-18.

the *Trinity* fresco—which would argue, in the end, that such an approach as Cusanus’, in its strikingly novel method and conclusions, is not at all such an isolated or unique case taking into consideration the broader intellectual and artistic contemporary Christian tradition.



## CHAPTER 2

### PERSPECTIVE AS A METHOD FOR THE SYSTEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF PARADOX

I will undertake here an account of linear, single-point perspective<sup>158</sup> as a geometrical construct and method of representation, informed by my interpretation of Cusanus' method, and avoiding, as much as possible, the complex controversies emerging out of the extensive existing literature which lie outside my purview<sup>159</sup>.

The connection between perspective, first fully developed in painting in the early fifteenth century<sup>160</sup>, and Western intellectual history has been explored in a number of influential works by philosophers and art historians<sup>161</sup>. Early fifteenth-century northern Italy (particularly centered in Florence) was a context in which such a connection between modes of thought and modes of painting is especially plausible<sup>162</sup>—a context with which Cusanus was strongly connected around the time he was developing *DDI*<sup>163</sup>. Perspective had only been

<sup>158</sup>To which I will refer as simply “perspective”. The use of the term raises important issues, one of which is unhistoricity: there was no equivalent for this term with a unified use similar to our own in the fifteenth century; see J. Elkins, “Renaissance Perspectives,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53, no. 2 (1992): 209-230. I will avoid this issue by employing a narrow focus on the problems relevant to my argument, and a strict definition of the term. For a different account that sees the same term as much more historically legitimate, see Tom Müller, *Perspektivität und Unendlichkeit: Mathematik und ihre Anwendung in der Frührenaissance am Beispiel von Alberti und Cusanus* (Regensburg: Roderer, 2010), 69-82.

<sup>159</sup> Such as the oft-debated question of whether perspective corresponds, or is meant to correspond, to ‘reality’, or to our modes of cognition, or whether it is merely a convention, etc.

<sup>160</sup> For a historical investigation of the origins of perspective, a classic work is by Samuel Edgerton, *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective* (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

<sup>161</sup> See, e.g., Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*, tr. Janet Lloyd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); for a recent treatment, see Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity With Nicholas of Cusa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

<sup>162</sup> For a theoretical defense of this, see Inigo Bocken, “Sehen und gesehen werden. Unendlichkeit und Sinnlichkeit im 15. Jahrhundert,” in *Kann das Denken malen? Philosophie und Malerei in der Renaissance*, ed. Inigo Bocken, Tilman Borsche (Munich: Paderborn, 2010), 95-110. For a thorough account of the networks of connection and influence, see Tom Müller, “Der ‘Florentiner Stammtisch’, eine frühe ‘Akademie’ der Wissenschaften und der Künste,” in *Das europäische Erbe im Denken des Nikolaus von Kues: Geistesgeschichte als Geistesgegenwart*, ed. Harald Schwätzer (Muenster: Aschendorff, 2008), 89-128.

<sup>163</sup> See, e.g., Pauline Moffit-Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus*, 20. For an account of the connections that can be made between Cusanus and contemporary artists focusing on his aesthetic theory see Giovanni Santinello, *Il Pensiero di Nicolo Cusanu Nella Sua Prospettiva Estetica* (Padua: Liviana, 1958), esp. 151-5, 229-31, 263-72.

recently invented (reportedly by Brunelleschi around 1420<sup>164</sup>), employed to great effect in Masaccio's *Trinity* (1427/8), and described theoretically in Alberti's *De Pictura* (1435). After an almost decade-long absence from Italy, Cusanus was in Florence in 1437 and very likely in 1438<sup>165</sup>; from 1438 to 1440 he developed his own avowedly novel philosophical method in *De Docta Ignorantia*.

The object of this chapter is to showcase a connection between perspective and Cusan thought, an issue that has recently attracted significant attention in the scholarship<sup>166</sup>, and to develop a simple interpretive method for perspectival images as, in short, systematic depictions of multiple levels of paradox, which, as I will show in Chapter 3, is the case in particular with Masaccio's *Trinity*.

To ascertain the similarity, and fittingness of a comparison between, perspective and Cusanus' method, I will first investigate an example of a perspectival construction. The construction in Fig.1, an educational example from Jan Vredeman de Vries' 1604 *Perspective* (a manual for painters), is fundamentally a two-dimensional arrangement of lines and shapes<sup>167</sup>. What distinguishes it from a merely abstract geometrical construction is that when viewed it can be interpreted in two possible ways: as a two-dimensional construction composed of two-dimensional elements, i.e., lines on a white background, or as a three-dimensional construction in which information is conveyed about depth and objects are presented in their particular positions within a three-dimensional 'scene': floor, walls, doors,

<sup>164</sup> For Brunelleschi's two famous public experiments, traditionally considered as marking its invention, see Samuel Edgerton, *The Mirror, the Window and the Telescope: How Renaissance Perspective Changed our Vision of the Universe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 44-77.

For a historical investigation on the development of perspective, see, e.g., Hugh Hudson, "The Monuments of Florence, Real and Imagined, in the Early Renaissance: The Development of Single-Point Perspective in Painting," 1-13..

<sup>165</sup> For the historical evidence see Chapter III.1.2 of this thesis.

<sup>166</sup> See, e.g., Charles Carman's excellent article "Meanings of Perspective in the Renaissance: Tensions and Resolution," in *Renaissance Theories of Vision*, ed. Charles Carman and John Hendrix (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 31-44; Cesare Cata, *Perpicere Deum*, 285-305; for a more general overview focused on German-speaking literature see Holger Simon, "Bildtheoretische Grundlagen des neuzeitlichen Bildes bei Nikolaus von Kues," *Concilium medii aevi* 7 (2004): 45-76.

<sup>167</sup> For the description of the fundamentals of a perspectival construction see, e.g., Panofsky's classic work, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 12-18.

windows, human figures. In whichever way we interpret the construction, the arrangement of the lines and shapes on the page is the same.

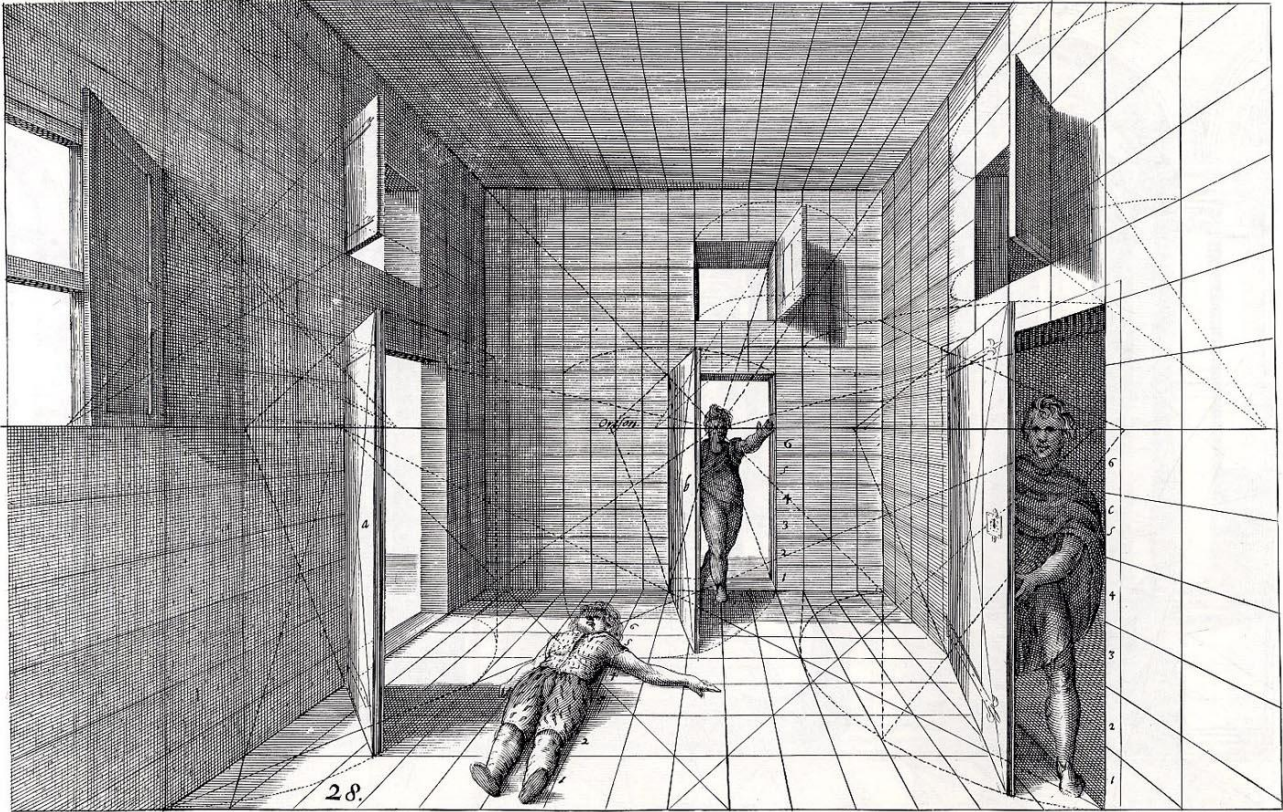


Fig. 1. Jan Vredeman de Vries, *Perspective* (1604-5; reprint, New York: Dover Books, 1968), plate 28.

What determines our sight being able to interpret it as ‘three-dimensional’? It is the set of inter-relations (i.e., in Cusan terms, the system of reciprocal *proportionones*) that exists between the elements we see which conveys the notion of a consistent ‘perspectival space’. By analogy with our experience of sight we see elements in the image that look like objects we know, such as the human figures, doors and windows; yet that is not enough to convey the sense of consistent space. The positions of these elements relative to each other, their respective sizes, generally all the definable proportional relations that exist between them, must fit together into one overall coherent system, as they do in Fig. 1—as shown by the prominent perspectival grid into which all the figures fit. It is this system that we perceive as

present in the image that gives the impression of coherent depth and spatial arrangement, and thus defines the perspectival construction<sup>168</sup>.

This system can be built in a simple manner: one particular point (the ‘vanishing point’, here placed in the eye of the figure in the back, where the lines intersect) is interpreted as being infinitely distant from the plane of the image (i.e., from ‘us’ as observers of the three-dimensional scene); all other points in the image are taken as progressively nearer to ‘us’ the more distant they are from the vanishing point. Further, all the radii of a circle with the center on the vanishing point are taken to represent parallels within the fictional space of the image, and any two different parallel distances on the image plane between any two of these radii are taken as depicting, in the fictional three-dimensional space, equal lengths. Thus, all distances on the image plane diminish proportionally with their fictional ‘distance’ from the viewer in a coherent system. This feature is unique to linear perspective<sup>169</sup>. All distances visible within the fictional scene are proportional to each other, and expressible in terms of each other. As a consequence, the recognizable objects (e.g., the human figures, the windows) all have apparent sizes on the picture plane that diminish proportionally to each other and their fictional ‘depth’. These main features thus define a perspectival construction: the vanishing point that is taken as ‘infinitely’ far away from the observer, the interrelated system of proportions of the elements depicted, and, necessarily, the edge of the construction (the ‘frame’ of the image).

Already one can remark on the correspondence between Cusanus’ account of the relationship of *proportio* which obtains between all finite and knowable things and this constructed mode of representation which structures everything depicted on precisely such a

<sup>168</sup> For a broadly similar theoretical account of perspective, see Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, , 64-104.

<sup>169</sup> Cf. Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, 68-74; Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 58-60.

principle<sup>170</sup>. Furthermore, considering the properties of the vanishing point leads us directly to Cusanus' S1 arguments, already discussed above, regarding the infinite and the fact that it escapes all *proportio*.

First, it is necessary to review the notion of 'infinity' in Cusanus; all the geometrical objects we can represent, Cusanus argues, are fundamentally finite<sup>171</sup>. Yet, they can manifest an infinity which is the same as the infinity of the series of natural numbers or of the universe: a 'privative infinity', *infinitas privativa*; no limit to it can be found since whatever we might set as limit there is always something more beyond it. The infinity of God, *infinitas negativa*, is radically paradoxical: the 'maximum' coincides with the 'minimum', all 'parts' coincide and are equal to the whole, etc. No part of a geometrical construction, viewed as a two-dimensional construct, can be infinite in that sense. Yet, if we interpret it as a three-dimensional geometric structure projected onto the picture plane and think in terms of distance from 'us', we deduce that the more distant something is from us, the more it will approach the vanishing point—without, however, coinciding with it. At the same time, the vanishing point itself can be construed as simply a point on the picture plane; thus, an indefinitely small point, indefinitely close to the vanishing point on the plane, will approach the vanishing point indefinitely, without ever coinciding with it.

If we apply the Cusan mode of argument we have examined of 'pushing' a finite quantity to infinity to create a paradoxical infinite object, we thus conclude, strikingly, that in the vanishing point, as geometrical point, zero distance from the picture plane and infinite distance from the picture plane coincide. Due to the dual interpretation of the vanishing point, as both a point on the plane and an infinitely distant point in space, maximum and minimum can be seen to coincide here. Thus, the vanishing point is a representation of the *coincidentia*

<sup>170</sup> Cf. Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, 64-78; see also his article "Power and Poverty of Perspective in Cusanus and Alberti", in *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*, ed. Peter Casarella (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 105-127.

<sup>171</sup> Cf. Mueller, *Perspektivität und Unendlichkeit*, 145, 158.

*oppositorum*<sup>172</sup>. Most fittingly, everything else in the image is ordered in relation to it, so that without it all coherent *proportio* between the elements of the image would disappear, precisely as Cusanus argues about the Maximum<sup>173</sup>.

We can also define the perspectival construction in the following way: The vanishing point is taken as the center of an indefinitely large sphere which we view from its circumference. Here again the construction presents an indelibly Cusan paradox; the sphere we see is at the same time the largest and the smallest; it either has infinite radius (and thus its center, infinitely distant from us, will project to the picture plane at the vanishing point), or zero radius (if we interpret the vanishing point as merely a point on the plane). The maximum coincides with the minimum. We are looking at an infinite sphere. Further, we can apply Cusanus' arguments by which he proves that an infinite line is an infinite triangle, circle and sphere<sup>174</sup>. Starting from the vanishing point, we can easily 'construct' a triangle and circle as coinciding with this point, which is also a line, which is also a triangle, etc.

Therefore, if we consider the geometrical relations that the two-dimensional/three-dimensional ambiguity make possible, the perspectival construction presents two striking characteristics: 1) it represents, as the vanishing point, the *coincidentia oppositorum*, and thus the infinite geometrical figures of Cusanus' demonstrations; indeed, since there is only one infinite 'thing', it represents God, as the Maximum with which the minimum coincides; 2) it presents all the elements in the image as ordered proportionally (in Cusanic terms, by means of *proportio*) in relation to each other, relationships essentially structured and made possible by the presence of the vanishing point as the *coincidentia oppositorum* of the greatest distance and smallest distance. Thus, the simplest perspectival construction presents a viewer who is willing to entertain such arguments with an image of the universe as Cusanus sees it,

---

<sup>172</sup> *DDI* I.4.11. Clifton Olds makes a similar point about the vanishing point in his essay "Aspect and Perspective in Renaissance Thought: Nicholas of Cusa and Jan van Eyck," in *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church*, ed. Christianson and Izbicki, 251-264, p. 254.

<sup>173</sup> *DDI* I.V.13-14.

effectively including both the S1 (ordering of everything in *proportio* in relation to an unknowable infinite Maximum) and S2 (paradoxes of the Maximum) levels of his argument<sup>175</sup>.

A further striking corollary can be derived if we consider the third fundamental element: the edge of the image. In Cusan terms, our perspectival construction is *contracted* to, i.e., limited by, the edges of the construction. If, according to the same Cusan mode of argument of ‘pushing’ a finite quantity to infinity, we imagine removing that limitation, so that the perspectival construction extends indefinitely in all directions without being bordered by anything, the construction becomes nothing else than the entire space of the universe itself.

This is paradoxical in several respects. For one, a two-dimensional construction has effectively ‘become’ three-dimensional. Also, it seems that any two different perspectival images, say, of the same scene from different angles, must differ in that they have two different vanishing points. However, if we remove the ‘edges’ of the two-dimensional surface, the ‘infinite image’ will extend with no boundaries, and will thus cover every conceivable planar surface in the universe—nothing will be outside it, and thus it will include all possible views of a scene. This ‘infinite image’ will still have only one vanishing point, since all vanishing points of any and all such infinite perspectival images will coincide—as there cannot be two distinct infinite things. This ‘infinite perspectival image’ will not be an *infinitas negativa* (will not be God) since it will contain ‘everything’ in a plural manner, not a coincident manner (for which only the vanishing point can serve as fitting representation). It

---

<sup>174</sup> *DDI* I.12.34ff.

<sup>175</sup> This is not to say that a viewer will be led necessarily to these considerations and only these. Nonetheless, I am describing a valid mode of ‘accessing’ such an image, which by its nature permits many different ‘starting points’, as opposed to a text which proceeds in a predetermined linear order. As a result, an attempt at making sense of the image as a whole necessarily has to, at some point, deal with (though not necessarily start with) the considerations I present here.

will thus be an *infinitas privativa*, containing ‘all things’, *omnia*. This is the construct that Cusanus calls the *maximum contractum*, the ‘universe’<sup>176</sup>.

According to these considerations, then, perspective seems uniquely fit to illustrate the basic features of the Cusan system. Yet someone might raise some objections here, as for instance Clifton Olds does in his 1996 article “Aspect and Perspective in Renaissance Thought: Nicholas of Cusa and Jan van Eyck”<sup>177</sup> against anyone ‘who hopes to discover in the realm of painting ... an object that can demonstrate the mental constructs of Cusanus’: that Cusanus’ works are ‘essentially exercises in mystical theology’ and ‘the world of the artist and that of the mystic,’ and also their ‘objectives,’ are ‘incompatible.’<sup>178</sup> The thrust of the objection is that Cusanus is discussing things that cannot be seen or represented, and that ‘to expect art to express the complex and abstract concerns of philosophy or theology is to ask far too much of it, and indeed to deny its concrete nature.’<sup>179</sup>

Yet these objections overlook Cusanus’ insistence at S1 that it is impossible not only to depict God by physical means but also to conceive or speak about Him—language, whether philosophical or theological, is in no way exempt from this, and is according to Cusanus on no better footing than the means used by a visual artist. Olds categorizes Cusanus with the too-narrow label of ‘mystic’ which seems to exclude by definition a focus on the particular and visible; his objections fail as his interpretation of Cusanus as a simple ‘mystic’ cannot account for why Cusanus first proves the impossibility of developing language about God (at S1), then proceeds to do precisely what he has just argued is impossible during the rest of the treatise (at S2 and every level above)—this, as shown in Chapter 1, is at the core of his paradox-based method. On the same Cusanic argument, it is possible to depict God visually, precisely *because* (1) it is impossible to depict God visually and (2) God cannot be

<sup>176</sup> This is the same as saying that such an infinite image will represent ‘the vision of God’, as opposed to an individual perspectival image, i.e., our own particular ‘barrel vision’. Olds, “Aspect and Perspective”, 254.

<sup>177</sup> Olds, “Aspect and Perspective,” 251-264.

<sup>178</sup> Olds, “Aspect and Perspective,” 251-252.



bound by a narrow language rule such as ‘it is impossible to depict God visually.’ A visual-representational method such as perspective can thus be used to the same theoretical effect as Cusanus’ own philosophical, language-based one.

A limitation of most scholarly accounts of perspective as philosophically significant needs to be addressed. In most accounts discussing its philosophical significance, it is defined as primarily a method for creating illusion, i.e., of the painted surface as a ‘window’ through which one looks at an illusory three-dimensional scene, which, further, is a rationalized, mathematized space. This follows broadly the first account of perspective as method, in Leon Battista Alberti’s treatise *Della Pittura* (On Painting, 1435)<sup>180</sup>. The two central features of perspective are thus taken to be its illusionistic character and the depiction of regular, mathematized space. Due to these features it is usually argued that it depicts an emerging new way of looking at the world in a train of thought leading up to the mathematization or ‘rationalization’ of the physical world, Descartes, modern thought, and modern science<sup>181</sup>. The merits of these interesting claims are outside my scope here. What is pertinent is examining the default assumptions that perspective is fundamentally a means of illusion, that its inherent ‘purpose,’ and the default intention of the artists employing it, is to fool the eye into taking the three-dimensional scene as ‘real,’ which assumptions are in important ways problematic and limiting.

The notion of ‘perspective as means of illusion’ in the standard account of perspective, arguably originating in Alberti’s rhetorical emphasis on the illusionistic effects of perspective in *Della Pittura*, is closely connected to the fact that, due to the geometrical structure, a perspectival image can give a (near-)convincing illusion of three-dimensionality

---

<sup>179</sup> Olds, *ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) was a Florentine humanist, architect, and polymath who gave the first theoretical treatment of what we understand as ‘perspective’ in his *De Pictura* (1435). There is significant literature on Alberti and Cusanus; much of it argues for their fundamentally different approaches: see, e.g., Silvio Agosta, “Mathematik und Perspektivitaet bei Cusanus und Alberti,” in *Die Modernitaeten des Nikolaus von Kues*, ed. Inigo Bocken and Harald Schwätzer, 187-215; Müller, *Perspektivität und Unendlichkeit*, 75-127.

if the eye of the viewer views it, immobile, from one specific geometrical point on the ‘viewer’s side’ of the space (which corresponds, by projection, to the vanishing point). But it is easy to overemphasize such an ‘illusion’, which would be fully convincing only for a fixed observer looking with one immobile eye from a unique geometrically fixed viewing position. This, in practical terms, is impossible<sup>182</sup>. Most of the time when viewing a perspectival image we do not see it from anywhere near the ‘right’ position; we thus have a direct awareness not only of the ‘illusion’ but also of its character as constructed and ordered space, which can thus be used as a topical theme and warrants much more complex discussions of perspective’s meaning than merely as an (inevitably unsuccessful) attempt to produce convincing illusion. This is a point which scholars have come to recognize more and more<sup>183</sup>.

But if defining perspective as ‘looking through a window’ into the illusory three-dimensional scene it constructs is reductive and ultimately unhelpful, how can it be better defined? I have already suggested one possibility above: to restrict the term to denoting nothing more than the geometrical construction of central-point converging lines in a bounded frame. But this, compared to the ‘looking through a window’ definition, seems to be excessive in the opposite direction as it completely abstracts from the fact that perspective suggests three-dimensional space, which is its most striking characteristic. A better working definition is thus needed, which would fall into neither of these extremes while incorporating the insights that each emphasizes.

I suggest that the grounds for my provisional definition of perspective should still be its etymological meaning. ‘Perspective’ in English is a borrowing of the Latin *perspectiva*, the feminine form of a verbal adjective which can be formed from either *perspicio*, -ere ‘to

---

<sup>181</sup> Harries, *Perspective and Infinity*, *passim*.; Hoff, *The Analogical Turn*, 44-60.

<sup>182</sup> According to Cusanus’ arguments as I have examined them, this is impossible as such; no perfect geometric construction can be built precisely in reality; thus the ‘viewing point’ can never be reached.

<sup>183</sup> See, e.g., Ken Wilder, “The Case for an External Spectator,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48, no. 3 (2008): 261-277; Damisch, *A Theory of /cloud/*, 182-183; Cata, *Perspicere Deum*, 289-294; Hugh Hudson, “The Monuments of Florence,” 4-8 (discussing Uccello).

look through, observe’ or *perspecto*, *-are* ‘look through to the end, examine closely’ – which possibilities involve two different meanings of the *per-* prefix: ‘through’ and ‘thoroughly’. It is formed either by adding the *-iv* suffix to the present stem of *perspectare*, which would give it a meaning of ‘pertaining to or tending to a close/thorough examination’, or to the participle stem of *perspicio*, *-ere*, which would give it a meaning of ‘having the tendency to be looked through’. This ambiguity should not be resolved but maintained, as illuminating and fruitful. As a verbal adjective in the feminine form, *perspectiva* agrees with a feminine noun—which can be *ars*, *scientia*, *doctrina* but also, importantly, *pictura*, *imago*, *figura*, *effigies*, *tabula* (as almost all nouns which can be applied to a visual image in Latin are feminine). But this does not offer what we seek in terms of a definition. For that we need to establish: if not ‘the illusion of a three-dimensional scene’, what is the object of the looking-through (*perspicere*) or the thorough examination (*perspectare*)? What is it that we are looking at when we are looking ‘through’, and examining, a perspectival image?

To provide the most fruitful answer to this question, I will apply here the mode of thought that Cusanus developed at the start of *DDI*, on the question of knowledge. Since we cannot know anything with *praecisio*, the true objects of our knowledge are the limits of our knowledge themselves; we need to know that we are ignorant (*scire nos ignorare*), and how – thus we can make our ignorance ‘learned’. Thus, the proper object of our attempts at knowledge is not, as it would seem, the particular objects we are trying to ‘know’—it is rather the paradox of our inability to know them. By this investigation Cusanus constructs his method to obtain, indirectly, knowledge about the unknowable.

This movement of thought, from ‘attempting to know X’ to ‘knowing how X is impossible to know, and—through exploration of X’s paradoxical properties—gaining knowledge about X’ can be tentatively termed a ‘Cusan turn’ and it can also be applied to how we understand perspectival images. Such an image seems to invite us to look ‘through’ it

as through a window to a scene beyond it, but on examination we see this is impossible. No such scene exists in three-dimensional reality, and only by particular effort (placing ourselves in a particular position, unmoved, using only one eye, etc.) can we even get close to seeing what the scene would actually look like were it real. But is a perspectival painting trying to fool us into thinking the illusory ‘scene’ is actually real? That would make it, in short, a failure: a badly constructed illusion.

However, if we are willing to give the painter more intellectual credit than as a tragically (or comically) failed illusionist, then, by applying the ‘Cusan turn’, we can see that the painting must have been proposing (depicting, inviting us to look at) a different kind of object all along: not the apparent ‘scene’, but its paradoxical nature. And just as the method of learned ignorance provides a way to derive knowledge from examining successive levels of paradox, a perspectival image invites us to look ‘through’, not to a mere three-dimensional scene (as if such a sight were possible), but to visual paradox: both to the structural element which directly represents paradox—the vanishing point—and also to any object which would break the established proportional geometrical rules that seem to create the ‘illusion’.

Viewed in this way, visual paradox is the object of perspective properly understood, just as for Cusanus paradox is the object of knowledge properly understood, i.e., *docta ignorantia*. Perspective can thus be defined as a “sighted unseeing”, a paradoxical ‘looking through’ the image surface not to an illusory three-dimensional space but as a ‘window’ unto the paradoxical. Thus defined, perspective would be nothing less than an “unseeing vision” of God, infinitely paradoxical, of which *docta ignorantia* provides us with an “unknowing knowing”.

To sum up, the crucial features of perspective according to my argument are the following:

- 1) the vanishing point - a representation of *coincidentia oppositorum*;

- 2) the organization of all its elements into an order of *proportio*;
- 3) the possibility of individual objects breaking that order to construct visual paradox – the lack of *proportio*;
- 4) the unattainable ‘ideal position’ of the viewer.

These elements I have identified are not at all contentious, but rather obvious features of any perspectival image; the interpretations I have employed are also likewise simple and hard to deny, whatever one’s views on the (here elided) controversies over, e.g., whether perspective corresponds to a truthful theory of vision or not. Further, these elements provide all the crucial requirements for illustrating a method very much like Cusanus’, and, as I will show in Chapter III, together with the iconological significations of the subject matter, suffice to build up, in a series of simple successive theoretical deductions, the most important features that also occur in Cusanus’ system. The connecting link will be the focus on a systematic treatment of paradox, a focus that Cusanus maintains, and which I will argue *The Trinity* also shows.

## CHAPTER 3

### PARADOX IN MASACCIO'S *TRINITY* (C.1427)—A PARALLEL WITH *DE DOCTA IGNORANTIA*

#### 1. The work and its historical context

Tommaso di Ser Giovanni di Simone Cassai (December 21, 1401 - autumn 1428), nicknamed Masaccio (from Masso, a shortened form of Tommaso, meaning “clumsy” or “messy Tom”), was one of the major Italian painters of the early fifteenth century, a time which saw a great development of naturalism and three-dimensionality in painting. Masaccio played an important role in this development; Giorgio Vasari in his *Lives of the Artists* (1568), one of the most valuable, though not necessarily reliable, sources of information about artists of the Italian Renaissance, describes him as the most skilled of his generation, particularly in respect to naturalistic and three-dimensional depiction, whose art had a great influence on his contemporaries and later Italian Renaissance painters<sup>184</sup>. He was in all likelihood trained in Florence<sup>185</sup>, but as almost nothing reliable is known about his early life the question of who he trained under remains open<sup>186</sup>. He is attested as having joined the painters' guild in Florence as an independent master at the beginning of 1422, from which year date the first works attributed to him. He is reported to have died in 1428, aged 26, near Rome, marking the end of a short but influential career.

---

<sup>184</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' piu eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi (Florence: Sansoni, 1906), vol. II, 287-288.

<sup>185</sup> For an account of the little that is known of Masaccio's early life, see John T. Spike, *Masaccio* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1996), 21-64; Diane Cole Ahl, *The Cambridge Companion to Masaccio*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3-5.

<sup>186</sup> According to Vasari (*Le Vite*, II, 295), Masolino was Masaccio's teacher, but the earliest known work by Masaccio (the San Giovenale Triptych) is painted in a style so different from Masolino's approach that this has been argued as unlikely on stylistic grounds—see Luciano Berti, “Masaccio 1422,” *Commentari* 12 (1961): 84-107. Scholars cannot agree on any teacher for the young artist, although several names (Mariotto di Cristofano, Bicci di Lorenzo, Niccolo di ser Lapo) have been put forward. Recently scholars have also suggested that he may have trained as a manuscript illuminator. See, e.g., Roberto Bellucci and Cecilia Frosinini, “Masaccio: Technique in Context,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Masaccio*, ed. Diane Cole Ahl (Cambridge: CUP Press, 2002), 105-122.

His fresco *The Holy Trinity with the Virgin, Saint John the Evangelist, and Donors* (c.1427), (usually referred to as the *Trinity*) in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence is the first surviving painting to systematically use linear perspective<sup>187</sup>; indeed, the marks of the geometrical means used for building the single-point perspectival construction are still visible on the finished work<sup>188</sup>. There are no surviving records of the commissioning of the work, and no definitive evidence as to its date of completion or who the patrons were (two of whom are depicted in the fresco itself). The prevailing scholarly opinion was once that the fresco was commissioned by the Lenzi family<sup>189</sup>, but recently it has been persuasively argued that the Berti family are most likely to have been the patrons, on the evidence of later references in their private chronicles to the chapel and altar of the Trinity (including the fresco) as their family burial place<sup>190</sup>. Beyond these conjectures, the details of the fresco's conception, and the meaning of its unusual iconography, can only be reconstructed tentatively by means of the most solid evidence we have: the fresco itself.

The fresco measures 667 x 317 cm and is located on the left wall of the nave of Santa Maria Novella. It consists of a perspectively depicted space which creates the illusion of a side chapel with a vaulted, coffered, Roman-style roof. Within the space of the chapel depicted, from higher to lower, we see the life-size figures of God the Father (represented with a notable lack of perspectival foreshortening); Christ on the cross; the Virgin Mary, and St. John; further below, the figures of the two patrons, husband and wife; further below, a

<sup>187</sup> Although elements of accurate linear perspective can be found earlier, e.g., in Lorenzetti's *Annunciation* (1344), it cannot be said that the perspective systematically informs the composition as a whole; this is clearly the case with *The Trinity*.

<sup>188</sup> This involves the trace of the nail used in the place of the vanishing point and marks from the ropes that Masaccio extended from it in order to construct a perspectival grid. For an account of Masaccio's process, see e.g., Barbara Deimling, "Early Renaissance Art in Florence and Central Italy," in *The Art of the Italian Renaissance*, ed. R. Toman (Cologne: Konemann, 1995), 244-246. For an in-depth study, see Volker Hoffmann, "Masaccios Trinitätsfresko: Die Perspektivkonstruktion und ihr Entwurfsverfahren," *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 40, no. 1 (1996): 42-77.

<sup>189</sup> See, e.g., Ugo Procacci, "Nuove Testimonianze su Masaccio," *Commentari* 27 (1976): 233-4; Rona Goffen, *Masaccio's "Trinity"*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Timothy Verdon, "Masaccio's Trinity: Theological, Social, and Civic Meanings," in *The Cambridge Companion to Masaccio*, ed. Diane Cole Ahl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 158-76, 158-160.

naturalistically depicted and foreshortened skeleton on a marble slab, framed by perspectively depicted columns, with the words depicted as inscribed in marble above it: “What you are, I already was. And what I am now, you will also be”<sup>191</sup>.

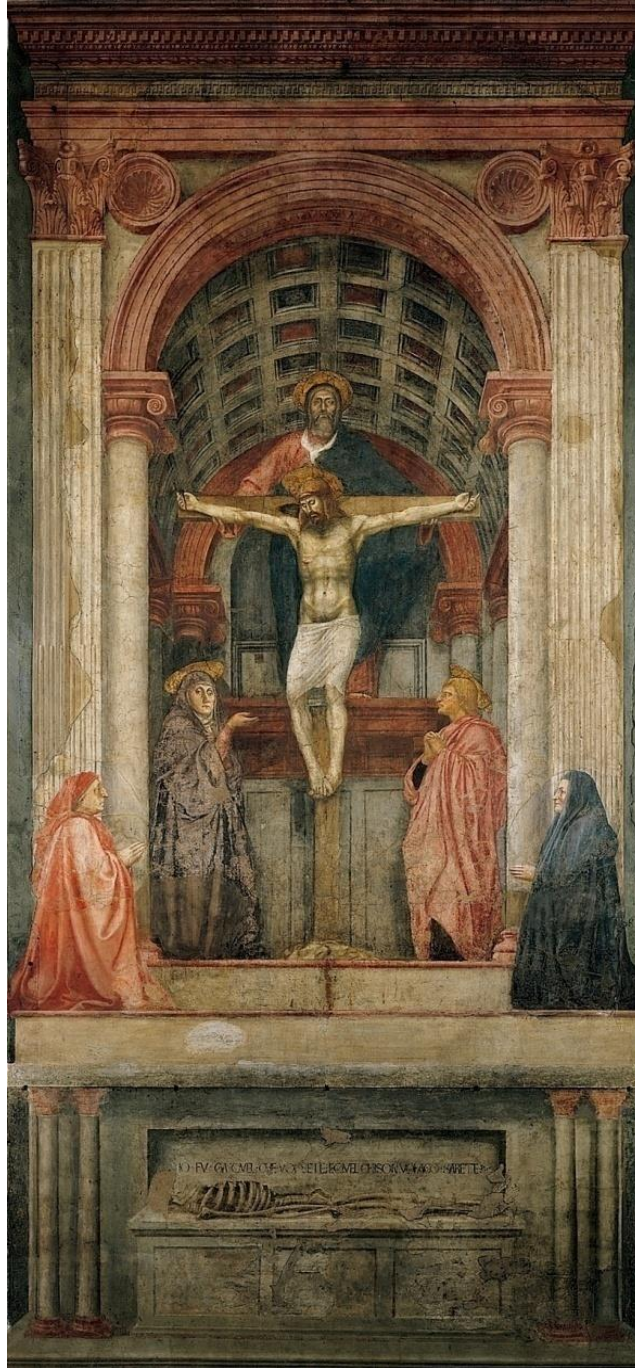


Fig. 2. Masaccio, *Trinity*, c.1427, Santa Maria Novella, Florence. From John T. Spike, *Masaccio* (Milano: Rizzolo Libri Illustrati, 2002). Licensed under Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.

<sup>190</sup> Rita Maria Comanducci, “L’altare Nostro de la Trinità’: Masaccio’s Trinity and the Berti Family,” *The Burlington Magazine* 145 (2003): 14-21.

<sup>191</sup> IO FU[I] G[I]A QUEL CHE VOI S[I]ETE E QUEL CH['] I[O] SONO VO[I] A[N]C[OR] SARETE



The fact that such an innovative fresco as the *Trinity* could be allowed inside Santa Maria Novella, a conservative Dominican church where commissions, even by the most wealthy and powerful, had to be approved and could be rejected for any incompatibility with the order's choices in subject matter and iconography, is itself a puzzle that requires explanation<sup>192</sup>. To account for this, and the fresco's theological complexity, a good theory has been argued to the effect that Masaccio had the assistance of Alessio Strozzi (d.1447), a Dominican living at Santa Maria Novella who was a renowned theologian and miniature painter and held as the foremost authoritative figure at the convent on artistic matters (he also held the rank of prior briefly between 1425 and 1426)<sup>193</sup>. He was also—Berti suggests—possibly the one responsible for the commission being offered to the young Masaccio<sup>194</sup>.

Further, it has also been argued convincingly that Fra Alessio's close friend Brunelleschi, the famed inventor of linear perspective, also collaborated with Masaccio on the *Trinity*. Several aspects point to this: the linear perspective, a great technical accomplishment, is much more prominent than in other extant works by Masaccio; the vault architecture depicted in the fresco shows some similarities to Brunelleschi's own architecture, particularly compared to other Masaccio works<sup>195</sup>; likewise, the careful construction of the architecture depicted in relation to the architecture of the church as a whole is said to point to involvement by the architect<sup>196</sup>. Further, the various methods used for projecting and foreshortening the architectural elements strengthen the argument that the expertise of an

<sup>192</sup> Alexander Perrig, "Masaccios 'Trinità' und der Sinn der Zentralperspektive," *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 21 (1986), 11-43, esp. pp. 16-18.

<sup>193</sup> Perrig, "Masaccios 'Trinità'," 32; Simson, "Über die Bedeutung," 157-8; Berti, "Masaccio 1422," 111.

<sup>194</sup> Berti, *ibid.*

<sup>195</sup> Further, the 1450 Cardini Chapel by Buggiano, Brunelleschi's adopted son (1412-1462), shows striking similarities to the architecture and construction in the *Trinity*; see Schlegel, "Observations," p.26.

<sup>196</sup> See, e.g., M.L. Cristiani-Testi, "La Trinità di Masaccio, Unità di Cosmo," *Critica d'Arte* 50, no. 4 (1985): 109-112, p. 109; R. Goffen, "Introduction: Masaccio's Trinity and the Early Renaissance," in *Masaccio's Trinity*, ed. R. Goffen (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1-32, p. 9. For a contrasting view, see Hugh Hudson, "The Monuments of Florence," p. 2, who finds the evidence insufficient.

architect was involved<sup>197</sup>. This also follows Vasari's account: according to him, Brunelleschi had 'spent much time demonstrating to Masaccio many rules of perspective and architecture'<sup>198</sup>. These arguments for the involvement of Fra Alessio Strozzi and Brunelleschi, although lacking direct evidence (as is true for all aspects of the fresco's creation), are plausible and well-founded. The arguments I will pursue here regarding the way in which the *Trinity* makes topical use of perspective as a methodological tool with an in-depth understanding of the theological tradition can be said to add further circumstantial evidence to the for such a connection between the three.

Thus, the fresco is likely to have been a collaborative endeavor between a painter, Masaccio, Brunelleschi, a humanist architect and polymath (and painter himself), and Fra Alessio, a theologian and painter. The fresco's striking innovativeness and complexity, hard to attribute otherwise solely to a young painter uneducated in the intellectual tradition of the time, thus become more plausibly accounted for; and a complex interpretation such as the one I am proposing is not *prima facie* implausible.

There is no direct source on Masaccio's (and his probable collaborators') thinking in constructing the fresco beside the finished work itself. While Vasari in his biography of Masaccio also purports to describe his manner of thinking, his account is much more a restatement of his own standards and rhetorical goals throughout the *Lives* than anything resembling a reliable historical account. Vasari relates that Masaccio "perceived that painting is nothing but the counterfeiting of all the things of nature, vividly and simply, with drawing and with colors, even as she produced them for us, and that he who attains to this most perfectly can be called excellent."<sup>199</sup> In view of the inaccuracies in his biography, written

<sup>197</sup> Jane Aiken, "The Perspective Construction of Masaccio's "Trinity" Fresco and Medieval Astronomical Graphics," in *Artibus et Historiae* 16, no. 31 (1995): 171-187, esp. p.173.

<sup>198</sup> Vasari, *Le Vite*, II, tr. DeVere, 299: "It is said that Filippo di Ser Brunellesco, hearing of his death, exclaimed, 'We have suffered a very great loss in Masaccio,' and that it grieved him infinitely, for he had spent much time in demonstrating to Masaccio many rules of perspective and of architecture."

<sup>199</sup> Vasari, *Le Vite*, tr. DeVere, vol. 2, 295-96.

more than a century later (e.g., identifying Masolino as Masaccio's master), and of the fact that this rhetorical theme of progress towards naturalism runs through Vasari's entire work<sup>200</sup>, we cannot take this as reflecting Masaccio's own conception of his artistic activity. The *Trinity* itself can be used as evidence that the 'imitation of nature' cannot fully describe Masaccio's efforts, as the perspectival anomalies employed intentionally clearly attest.

### 1.1. When did Cusanus see the *Trinity*?

The answer that can be tentatively given to this question establishes it as an issue of some potential importance. It seems Cusanus had the first opportunity to see firsthand the new developments in Florentine art (in particular, the *Trinity*) very near the time he was starting work on *De Docta Ignorantia*.

After studying in Padua between 1417 and 1423, a time in which he became close friends with his schoolmate Paolo Toscanelli, Florentine humanist, polymath, and friend of Brunelleschi, and after a stay in Rome in 1424, Cusanus seems to have been away from Italy from ca. 1425 (when he is attested as enrolling in courses at the University of Cologne, where he studied philosophy and theology with Heymericus de Campo) to 1437, when the pro-papal faction at the Council of Basel dispatched him as an envoy to Pope Eugenius IV at Bologna on May 20. There is no evidence of any voyage to Italy in the intervening years<sup>201</sup>. In Bologna, the pope named Cusanus as part of the delegation to the Byzantine court which was to leave for Constantinople. As the preparations for the journey were underway, Cusanus is attested as still being at Bologna on July 17, 1437; at the end of July, his ship set sail from

<sup>200</sup> On Vasari's rhetorical agenda, which informs the *Lives*, see Carl Goldstein, "Rhetoric and History in the Italian Renaissance and Baroque," *The Art Bulletin* 73, no. 4 (1991): 611-652.

<sup>201</sup> It is not impossible that he undertook voyages of which no evidence is known. For instance, it has been argued on the basis of his copies and quotations from Thierry of Chartres that Cusanus must have been in Paris around 1428—see Christianson, Izbicki, and Watanabe, ed., *Nicholas of Cusa*, 225-226; however, there is no direct evidence of this journey. Nevertheless, on the available evidence, particularly due to his continuous legal employment on behalf of Ulrich von Manderschied and his participation in the Council of Basel during this period, it can be stated with some confidence he was not in Italy before 1437.

Venice<sup>202</sup>. This leaves the time period between May 30, 1437 (when the papal bull *Salvatoris et dei nostri* approved his mission to Constantinople) and mid-July, when Cusanus apparently has some leisure time in Italy. We know that he went to Rome during this time, bringing with him a manuscript of Diomedes' *Ars Grammatica*<sup>203</sup>. On his way from Bologna to Rome and back, he very likely made a short stay in Florence to visit his close friend, Toscanelli. Thus, it is likely he also had the opportunity to see the *Trinity* in Santa Maria Novella, on which Toscanelli's friend Brunelleschi may have collaborated.

After returning from Greece, arriving in Venice on February 8, 1438, and (likely) taking part in the first session of the Council of Ferrara-Florence at Ferrara on April 8, 1438, Cusanus is again attested as being in Ferrara in mid-June 1438, when he was sent as papal courier to the cities of Swabia on the question of the dispute between the pope and the Council of Basel<sup>204</sup>. In the intervening two months, he likely visited his friends in Florence, particularly Toscanelli<sup>205</sup>. This is the second opportunity he would have had, after his 'illumination' on the voyage from Greece, to see Masaccio's fresco. We do not have evidence of him being in Florence again until after the completion of *De Docta Ignorantia*, in March-April and October-November 1440<sup>206</sup>.

Thus Cusanus had opportunity to observe firsthand the Florentine artistic developments immediately before and after his voyage to Constantinople and back, when he had his 'illumination'. While no direct evidence of any 'influence' can be produced, the image of Cusanus possibly pondering his newly-gained insight of a method of acquiring paradoxical knowledge of God while contemplating the multiple levels of theological paradox in Masaccio's fresco is, at least, intriguing as a real possibility.

<sup>202</sup> Christianson, Izbicki, and Watanabe, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 286.

<sup>203</sup> Helen M. Dixon, "Pomponio Leto and his teachers Lorenzo Valla and Pietro Odo da Montopoli: Evidence from work on Lucretius," *Italia Medioevale e Umanistica* 51 (2010): 261-301, p.262, note 4.

<sup>204</sup> Bond, *The Historical Matrix*, 145-6.

<sup>205</sup> Cf. Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues*, 239.

<sup>206</sup> Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues*, 94, 153.

## 2. The method

I will follow the outline of the same basic argument I formulated for *De Docta Ignorantia* in Chapter I. This order of ‘reading’ the fresco appears best, as an examination of the features of the fresco will provide striking illustrations of all the ‘steps’ of the ‘learned ignorance’ method. A crucial issue must be, however, addressed here: a main difference between a text and a philosophically-informed painting is that, while a text dictates the default order of a reader’s interaction with it (i.e. the reader proceeds from the beginning to the end), a painting does not: the viewer can theoretically start his exploration of the themes and underlying messages in a painting from any particular starting point: one detail, one figure, the arrangement of the whole composition, etc. Thus, one might object that the order of my ‘reading’ of the *Trinity* is arbitrary, and that in applying the systematic account of Cusanus’ method developed in Chapter 1 I am forcing on the fresco a systematic reading that its maker(s) likely did not envisage.

To this objection I respond in two ways: one, that there are good arguments, philosophical and theological, for proceeding in the order I will choose, i.e. starting from the perspectival structure which frames the whole composition and proceeding from the figure of God the Father ‘downwards,’ so that each stage of the argument builds upon the observations made at the previous stages; two, that, ultimately, regardless of the order in which one constructs one’s reading, all the elements I describe at different stages in the argument are present and must be accounted for, and the relationships between them are necessarily dictated by the iconographical and theological meaning they point to, so that, ultimately, the same overall order emerges regardless of one’s starting point. Thus, the order in which I will present is not the only one possible, but the logical order which emerges when all these elements are accounted for, which yields an overall argument strikingly fitting with Cusanus’.

This is not to say that this fundamental similarity means that Masaccio (and his likely collaborators) developed Cusanus' paradox-centered method before Cusanus did; rather, it is to highlight how Cusanus' achievement is a systematization of elements that were already in the tradition, and already being experimented with in the cultural context, and how Masaccio's fresco is itself an attempt at just such a systematization.

## **2.1. S1 – Order: the immediate visible level and perspective effect**

We are first confronted with the striking illusionistic effect: the fresco renders the appearance of a 'chapel' in the side wall of Santa Maria Novella. This was achieved by means of single-point linear perspective; the vanishing point is on the central axis (that divides the fresco in two) approximately on the level of an observer's eye<sup>207</sup>, and on the same level of height as the feet of the patrons directly below Christ's cross. Its location is in fact emphasized by the presence of the 'rift'—a crack depicted in the marble ledge below Christ's cross, which is significant, and which ends (going downward) at the vanishing point.

The observations I made on perspective as a method in Chapter II apply here: the fresco presents an ordered, measured space in which everything depicted has its own position within the fictional three-dimensional space, the distances and sizes being proportional to each other.

Further, we see those depicted in the fresco from only one 'side'—there is indefinitely more to the scene that escapes, and always will escape, our notice (e.g., the same scene viewed from another angle); similarly, there is indefinitely more 'detail' to the scene than we

---

<sup>207</sup> The complex measurements conducted by Field, Lunardi and Settle, the best set of precise measurements available of the *Trinity*, set the vanishing point as being on the central axis, at 172cm above the church floor; see J. V. Field, R. Lunardi, and T. B. Settle, "The Perspective Scheme of Masaccio's Trinity Fresco," *Nuncius* 4, no. 2 (1989): 31-118.

can see. The fresco illustrates a world in which precise measurement, and thus precise truth, is unattainable<sup>208</sup>.

## **2.2. S2 – Paradox: the vanishing point**

It is easily visible in situ, even without precise measurement, that the vanishing point must lie somewhere close to the base of Christ's cross, which lies on the central axis. Our attention is drawn to the area just below the cross, where the 'rift' marks a crack in the marble floor of the chapel. The measurements show that the vanishing point lies precisely at the bottom of this 'rift'.

The coincidence of opposites of the infinitely distant point coinciding with the infinitely close cannot be easily seen, since our 'view' of the former is blocked by the marble of the base of the depicted chapel. On the argument I have made in Chapter 2, this coincidence is implicit in the perspectival structure itself. A powerful visual confirmation of this can be seen to arise from the iconography of the small 'rift' itself. This almost certainly represents the 'splitting of the rocks' at Christ's death (Mark 15:38, Matthew 27:51), occurring concomitantly with the splitting of the curtain of the Temple at Jerusalem and the rising of the dead, and thus symbolically stands for the old world order being broken by Christ's sacrifice<sup>209</sup>. We may thus interpret the vanishing point as being effectively 'located' in the rift positioned symbolically in the foundations of the cosmos, representing what is seen 'through' such a crack: which can be nothing else but the paradoxical infinity of God. This

---

<sup>208</sup> The fact that Masaccio does not use a perfectly consistent geometrical perspectival grid but rather 'adjusts' the foreshortening, likely for aesthetic reasons, works precisely towards the same goal of showing the limitedness of the world depicted. Although the impression is that by a simple set of geometrical proportions one could accurately describe the setup of the scene, the reality using modern techniques of measurement is different. For instance, the first two rows of the vault have been adjusted so their proportions are not mathematically correct (Aiken, "The Perspective Construction," 182). Also, calculations of the distance of the 'observer point' for the perspectival construction have yielded wildly inconsistent results. See, e.g., Aiken, "The Perspective Construction," note 37, p.187, where she discusses the results of Field, Lunari, and Settle's measurements.

<sup>209</sup> Perrig, "Masaccio's "Trinità", 41, n. 80.

fits precisely with my reading of the vanishing point as *coincidentia oppositorum*, representing the S2 paradoxical names for God.

### 2.3. S3 – Order: cosmic order

The orderly arrangement and disposition of the elements of the fresco gains new meaning after the S1 and S2 considerations above. The hierarchical, orderly, and harmonious relations function as a paradoxical image of that which is beyond paradox and beyond radical unrepresentability. The hierarchical ordering, from further to closer and from higher to lower, of the figures depicted, from God the Father, the Incarnate Son, the saints, the donors<sup>210</sup> to the regular believers on ‘our’ level, works to this effect.

To the same effect we can count the numerous harmonious geometrical relations found throughout the structure of the fresco, especially in the proportions and arrangement of the architecture, and (at least for the contemporary viewer possessing a certain level of knowledge in astronomy) Masaccio’s apparent employment of projection techniques used in astronomy, particularly in association with the astrolabe, to render the perspectival coffered vault<sup>211</sup>.

### 2.4. S4 – Paradox: an “Incarnation” of the triune God

An additional extra ‘layer’ of paradox is then noticeable. The figure of God the Father is a perspectival anomaly; it is not foreshortened like the other figures<sup>212</sup>, and its position is impossible to determine as it seems to be both standing on a ledge at the back of the chapel

---

<sup>210</sup> Most likely deceased—Dempsey argues based on the iconography that the fresco is a funerary monument. See Charles Dempsey, “Masaccio’s Trinity: Altarpiece or Tomb?,” *The Art Bulletin* 54, no. 3 (1972): 279-281.

<sup>211</sup> See Aiken, “The Perspective Construction,” *passim.*, esp. p.174.

<sup>212</sup> Goldberg argues on this basis that the perspective is effectively divided into ‘higher’ and ‘lower’; he concedes that this is equivalent to describing one single overarching construction with God as perspectivally anomalous, which is my reading. See Jonathan Goldberg, “Quattrocento Dematerialization: Some Paradoxes in a Conceptual Art,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35, no. 2 (1976): 153-168, esp. p.156.



and holding Christ's cross, which is towards the front<sup>213</sup>. According to the perspectival order, God is both there and not there; his figure lacks proper *proportio* to the other figures; strangely in contrast, his halo is properly foreshortened according to perspective. As noted in Chapter 2, perspectival anomalies are powerful illustrations of paradox. The paradox here is nothing other than the Incarnation. Although God is depicted as perspectivally anomalous, we see he is meant to have a human body and be subject implicitly to laws of nature, as we see from his feet positioned on the ledge. Unlike most depictions of God in the iconography of other contemporary *Gnadenstuhl* images<sup>214</sup>, this is an entirely 'naturalistic' space with God not differentiated from the human figures except by the (foreshortened) halo and His perspectivally anomalous nature.

The meaning of the paradox cannot be analyzed fully without taking into account both Christ and the Holy Spirit—the Trinity is here represented. Thus, Christ (depicted after death), has a fully perspectivally realized human body. Yet, in theological terms, it is only through the theophany of Christ that we can justify depicting God the Father: 'if you have seen me', Christ says, 'you have seen the Father'<sup>215</sup>. Fittingly (as is also rather common in *Gnadenstuhl* images) God the Father is depicted with similar facial features as (although 'older' than) Christ, dressed in red, and covered by a blue cloak as Christ is traditionally depicted. The two colors are another element of the iconographical tradition, representing the paradoxical union of humanity and divinity in Christ's two natures.

The Holy Spirit, in the form of a white dove, is peculiarly drawn—at first sight one might confuse the dove with God the Father's white collar. On closer inspection, the peculiar position of the dove places it visually between the red and blue visible portions of God the

<sup>213</sup> Aiken, "The Perspective Construction," 182 n. 3.

<sup>214</sup> The *Trinity* is an example of a *Gnadenstuhl* ('Throne of Mercy') image, showing God the Father with the Holy Spirit presenting Christ crucified to humanity. These images were popular both in northern and southern European religious art, particularly in the fourteenth century. For an exploration of the iconography and precedents in *Gnadenstuhl* images, see Otto Simson, "Über die Bedeutung von Masaccios Trinitätsfresko in S. Maria Novella," *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 8 (1966): 119-159, esp. 125-151.

Father's dress. The Holy Spirit, thus, is depicted as a 'connection' between the blue and red—thus, we can infer, between the divine and human. This brings us straight to the Incarnation, said to have been accomplished 'by the power of the Holy Spirit'; fittingly, the dove 'emanates' the rays which seem to form Christ's halo. The connection to Cusanus' account of the Holy Spirit as *connexio*, pointedly active in the paradoxical union found in Christ, is striking here.

The complex of the three figures thus represents, by the force of the iconography and the perspectival paradox, both the Trinity and the Incarnation. Christ (depicted as with a regular human body, but known iconographically as divine-human) is one with God the Father (depicted as incarnate in a perspectively anomalous form). The dove of the Holy Spirit, intimately connected visually with, and connecting, the two figures, both 'projects' Christ's halo and unites the red and blue sections of God the Father's garments, iconographically standing for Christ's two natures. Christ's paradoxical Trinitarian sayings in John 14 are thus strikingly illustrated.

The colors red and blue recur in symmetrical alternating patterns throughout the fresco: the garments of the saints and donors, the coffers of the vault. Their particular iconographical significance makes this another possible recurrence of the motif of the coincidence of opposites<sup>216</sup>.

It has been suggested that the primary theme of the fresco is the presence of spirit in matter, or 'dematerialized materialization'<sup>217</sup>. This is entirely consonant with the interpretation presented here. Further, this theme is reconciled with the 'Trinity' as subject matter by way of the network of paradox and iconography that Masaccio presents with the three figures of the persons of God, which represents the Trinity at the same time as

---

<sup>215</sup> John 14:8-9.

<sup>216</sup> Cf. Perrig, "Masaccios "Trinità", 30-31.

<sup>217</sup> Goldberg, "Quattrocento Dematerialization," 153.

providing an argument for the representability of the unrepresentable triune God. The Trinity is shown through showing the Incarnation.

## 2.5. S5 – Order: The Church Militant – the perspectival chapel space and donors

Through the previous level of paradox, as I noted in Cusanus' chain of arguments, the world is ordered anew by relation to the instance of *coincidentia oppositorum* at the last stage. In relation to the incarnate Christ, the Church is this new order. But this fits strikingly with Masaccio's fresco, as it places the crucified Christ within a fictional chapel inside a real church. Ursula Schlegel has argued that this 'chapel' is meant to be a replica of the Golgotha Chapel in Jerusalem<sup>218</sup>. Timothy Verdon has recently argued that the fresco should be connected with other frescos in Santa Maria Novella, which form a coherent theological program exalting the Dominican order, in whose typical exegesis the Trinity was the focus of worship and provided the image of an ideal familial community which the blessed will join after death<sup>219</sup>. These different interpretations all point towards the notion that the fictional chapel which provides the setting for the *Trinity*'s scene stands in a definite way for the community of the Church as such.

The visual hierarchical organization of the figures in the composition points to such a meaning as well: the Triune God, God's incarnate form in Christ, the Virgin Mary and St. John, then the donors on a lower level, then the skeleton at the bottom. The *Gnadenstuhl*, further, is a typical Eucharistic image<sup>220</sup>, and the *Trinity* was most likely used as an

<sup>218</sup> Ursula Schlegel, "Observations on Masaccio's Trinity Fresco in Santa Maria Novella," *The Art Bulletin* 45, no. 1 (1963): 19-33. Simson disagrees, on the main grounds that it is a fictional chapel and not a real one. Simson's own view is that the *Trinity* iconographically points to a widely known fourteenth-century *meditatio*. See Simson, "Über die Bedeutung von Masaccios Trinitätsfresko," 125, 150.

<sup>219</sup> Timothy Verdon, "Masaccio's Trinity: Theological, Social, and Civic Meanings," in *The Cambridge Companion to Masaccio*, ed. Diane Cole Ahl (Cambridge: CUP Press, 2002), 158-76. On the Dominican Order and their focus on the Trinity, see also Simson, "Über die Bedeutung," 125, 157.

<sup>220</sup> See, e.g., Kristen Van Ausdall, "Art and Eucharist in the Late Middle Ages," in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages*, ed. Ian Levy, Gary Macy, Kristen Van Ausdall (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 541-618; on Masaccio's *Trinity* and the *Gnadenstuhl* as a Eucharistic image, see 598-601.

altarpiece<sup>221</sup>. The Virgin Mary involves the individual viewer by looking straight out of the fresco (such that the effect, the same as the one Masaccio uses for the eyes of God the Father, is that she seems to be looking directly at us as viewers) and showing us, with a presentational gesture, Christ crucified<sup>222</sup>. Further, the message above the skeleton, in the vernacular Italian (tr. ‘I was what you are now, and what I am now, you too will be’), seems to be, on the primary level, a reference to a well-known legend, of ‘The Three Living and The Three Dead’—in which context it is a *memento mori* and a call to repentance<sup>223</sup>.

The fresco’s perspectival construction involves the viewer in its fictional space in another way: the donors and the sarcophagus with the skeleton below are not placed ‘inside’ the chapel, but outside it, i.e., on ‘our’ side of the wall—they inhabit a space which illusionistically transgresses into our own. We are thus also placed ‘within’ its represented space<sup>224</sup>. See the reconstruction in Fig. 3.

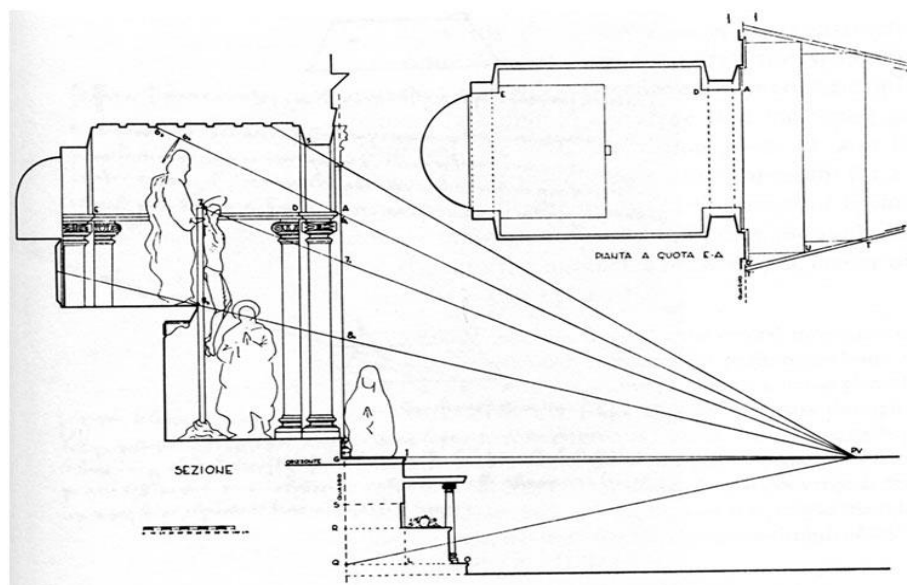


Fig. 3. Masaccio's *Trinity* - reconstruction of plan and elevation. Piero Sanpaolesi, *Brunelleschi* (Milano: Edizioni per il Club del Libro, 1962), figure C, opp. p. 52.

<sup>221</sup> Most scholars agree with this. See Dempsey, “Masaccio's ‘Trinity’: Altarpiece or Tomb?” for a contrasting position.

<sup>222</sup> Dempsey, “Masaccio's ‘Trinity’”, 281, argues this is a typical representation of *Maria mediatrix*.

<sup>223</sup> This interpretation is put forth by most scholars. See, e.g., Simson, “Über die Bedeutung,” 142.

<sup>224</sup> This striking effect could have been at least emphasized by the removal of a hypothetical original frame around the fresco, which was moved several times during its history. Schlegel, “Observations,” on pp. 22-24, argues that the intrusion into the viewer’s space is too unprecedented stylistically for the time period, and thus that one should assume a surrounding architectural ‘frame’ depicted around the whole composition, separating it from its environment; her views on this are not shared by most scholars.

Further, the crucial new feature introduced at this level in Cusanus' arguments, the presence of *fides*, a completely new hierarchical principle, is strikingly paralleled in Masaccio's construction by the 'observer's point', implicit in the perspectival construction, the point at which the scene, considered illusionistically, would look most like a real scene, and even possibly fool the (single, unmoved) eye. This, however, is a geometrical point; according to Cusanus' S1 arguments, it is impossible to 'find' a precise geometrical point in empirical reality—it will always be possible to approximate it even closer to the ideal. But this creates exactly the sort of hierarchy that the 'participation' in *fides* at S5 represents. The necessarily endless attempt to better approximate the 'geometrically perfect' viewing point—which would afford something like an individual 'vision' of the paradoxical Trinity depicted<sup>225</sup>—thus parallels the necessarily endless attempt to better imitate Christ by faith formed by love, which, perfectly accomplished (as it is only in the afterlife), would afford a vision of God 'face to face'.

## **2.6. S6 – Paradox: Christ's Judgment – death and the message on the tomb**

S6 corresponds with death and God's judgment as beginning of the afterlife in my treatment of Cusanus' arguments. Death and the afterlife are prominent themes in the lower part of Masaccio's fresco, which has also been interpreted as a funerary monument<sup>226</sup>: the portraits of the donors who might have been deceased at the time of commission, Christ depicted as dead, and the skeleton with its *memento mori*. Simson has argued that the *Gnadenstuhl* combines the themes of God's mercy with God's judgment, and thus that the

<sup>225</sup> Cf. Schlegel, "Observatio," 30, who points out the uniqueness of the 'immediacy' of the 'vision of God', not depicted as a vision of a saint but presented to the beholder, 'available to anyone'.

<sup>226</sup> Dempsey, "Masaccio's 'Trinity': Altarpiece or Tomb?," 279-281.

iconography suggests individual prayer to God invoking the intercession of Christ to propitiate one's sins on Judgment Day<sup>227</sup>.

## **2.7. S7 – Order: The Church Triumphant – the saints**

The new hierarchy established here in Cusanus' account, which preserves every believer's personal existence and *gradus*, is also represented prominently in the fresco, in the form of the hierarchy of figures including the saints and the donors, who in hope and relative humility place themselves near the saints but on a lower level. The saints, Cusanus argues, are able to enjoy a direct unmediated vision of God in the afterlife; so do the figures depicted in Masaccio's fictional space, including the donors: in their space, God is present visibly and physically. We, indelibly closed off from the space depicted in the fresco, do not have such access to the physical presence of God—and thus the inaccessibility of this space provides a striking parallel for the difference between the 'vision of God' available to us in this life vs. that in the next.

A further crucial element here is the message above the skeleton: 'I was what you are, and what I am now, you will also be.' At the previous level of the argument (S6) it functions as a *memento mori*—but in a Christian context this can have other important meanings. At this level, we can interpret it as being spoken by God (one of the figures appearing to look at the viewer directly), meaning: 'I was what you are, i.e., I became a human being; and what I am now, i.e., a human being in the state of resurrection and glory, you will also be'. Echoing St. Athanasius' 'God became man so that man may become God', this is a strikingly concise statement of the Christian proposal.

---

<sup>227</sup> Simson, "Über die Bedeutung," 125-150.

## 2.8. S8-S9 – Paradox-Order: Partaking of the inexhaustibly infinite God

The inscription, however, is presented as ‘carved in stone’ within the fictional space of the fresco. This is yet another striking parallel with the next stage of Cusanus’ argument; the statement is not merely true when said by one of the blessed to one still in his earthly life, but it can be said to be true even said by oneself to oneself, or by one of the blessed to another. There is no stopping point to the infinite experience of God; thus, Cusanus’ formulation ‘they have drunk, and they have been filled, yet they have never drunk, and have never been filled’ works in a precisely similar manner.

## 2.9. Sn-Sn+1 – The recurring pattern

It is possible to unify my reading by identifying the principle of such an unending progression as a central element of the fresco, God the Father, whose figure is visible yet not proportional within the context of the fictional chapel space. Thus, he necessarily escapes full ‘view’, by the viewers (us), the donors, and the saints. The fundamental principle of *docta ignorantia* is thus illustrated, which determines all the levels and their order of progression in a fundamentally similar way as the figure of Christ, just as the paradigmatic figure of *coincidentia oppositorum* provides a unifying illustration of the paradoxical progression which underlies *De Docta Ignorantia*.

## 3. Corollaries

I have thus examined the *Trinity* as consonant in theological message and paradox-centered method with *De Docta Ignorantia*. The crucial element which makes this reading possible and plausible is the use of perspective as an overall representational method, in a way which suggests that Masaccio, and his likely collaborators Brunelleschi and Fra Alessio

Strozzi, were reflectively making use of perspective's features (in depicting an ordered world) and limitations (in being unable to encompass within its rules the figure of God the Father).

The other levels and layers of the argument build upon this basic perspectival structure, which involves the viewer by presenting him or her with an inaccessible fictional three-dimensional space, here a chapel where the God is depicted as present physically (although perspectivally anomalous).

Masaccio's *Trinity* and Cusanus' *De Docta Ignorantia* thus come to view as ultimately convergent attempts at a systematic treatment of the fundamental elements of the Christian tradition, interpreting and rendering them within a scheme of multi-layered paradox. This makes possible my unified reading of Cusanus' text and Masaccio's fresco in the context of the tradition, in a fruitful application of what Cesare Cata calls 'a hermeneutic of mutual clarification'<sup>228</sup>. This is in no way ultimately surprising, since both works self-consciously place themselves in the same broad contemporary Christian tradition where the paradoxes I have examined are essential elements.

---

<sup>228</sup> Cata, *Perspicere Deum*, 290.



## CONCLUSIONS

I have shown how Masaccio's *Trinity* fresco can be said to attempt the same basic task with respect to its depicted theology as Cusanus does with his novel method in *De Docta Ignorantia* – a systematic treatment of the central claims of the Christian tradition based fundamentally on paradox. Just as in Cusanus, the coincidence of opposites seems to reoccur in various forms as a prominent and clearly intentional feature at every crucial iconographical level of the composition: regarding God, Christ, the Church, and the infinitely progressive union of believers with God. This is not to say that Cusanus' synthesis is not unique or that Masaccio and his likely collaborators Brunelleschi and Fra Alessio Strozzi had already systematized these insights in a similar way to Cusanus. Instead, these considerations point to the fundamental connection between Cusanus' 'new' method and the Christian tradition it stems from. As Karen Hudson argues, the paradoxical formulations that Cusanus brings forth are fundamentally Christian, and orthodox, within a tradition that spans Eastern and Western Christianity, although each is arguably expressed with different emphases<sup>229</sup>.

Thus, I argue, in agreement with scholars such as Moffit-Watts, that the perceived extraordinary and 'modern' aspects of Cusanus' thought and the difficulties of placing him within the context of his time are not as much due to him standing out as a radical exception among his contemporaries as they are due to modern misinterpretation of elements of his contemporary intellectual context<sup>230</sup>. In the context of the nowadays development of intellectual projects aimed at overcoming some of the inherited and limiting traditions of modernity, such as 'classical logic', and developing means of expanding our possibilities for thought and reasoning in new ways with and about paradox (such as, e.g., that of proponents of non-classical logics such as Graham Priest), it is striking that at the same time we are

---

<sup>229</sup> Bynum, *Becoming God*, 11-15; she calls this tradition 'Neoplatonic'. See also Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite*, for an account of this tradition in Western thought with an emphasis on Cusanus and Meister Eckhart.

<sup>230</sup> Cf. Moffit-Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus*, 32.

beginning to discover in the Christian tradition not only attempts, but even developed methods (whether Cusanus' philosophical-theological approach or the artistic-representational ones typical of the Renaissance that, as Cata also argues, Masaccio's *Trinity* is a fitting example for<sup>231</sup>) to deal with precisely the same task, in the context of thinking through paradox regarding the central Christian claim of the Incarnation<sup>232</sup>. These ongoing developments in the scholarship suggests that more 'paradox-friendly' accounts are needed of aspects of the Christian tradition at all its stages—and indeed this seems to be the main fault of the scholarly approaches that have not found a way to relate Cusanus to his intellectual context. Nicolaus Cusanus represents one of the most promising leads in this direction; thus, despite all the scholarly attention he has received in the past century, the conclusion seems warranted that, seeing his potential importance as a 'gateway' to acquiring a better conception of the intellectual context where he worked, more in-depth study of his works is still needed.

Therefore, four directions can be outlined for future research. The first is to examine this paradox-centered method in its wealth of interesting consequences and corollaries, as a philosophical proposal in its own right. The second is to examine the Christian tradition, both Eastern and Western, from the philosophical-theological perspective that this method provides, and, building upon, e.g., Jaroslav Pelikan's later work, give an account of Christianity as centered on paradox and the elaboration of methods by which it can be thought. The third is to investigate Cusanus' later texts, starting with his next major work *De Conjecturis*, and examine how he develops his thought further from the method outlined here for *De Docta Ignorantia*. The fourth is to investigate other fifteenth-century artworks from

<sup>231</sup> Goldberg argues more generally that such a paradox was a fundamental theme in Renaissance art. See Jonathan Goldberg "Quattrocento Dematerialization: Some Paradoxes in a Conceptual Art", 153-168.

<sup>232</sup> Caroline Bynum argues effectively that such methods were part of daily life in the context of Christian piety, particularly regarding relics and the Eucharist, throughout the Middle Ages. See *Christian Materiality*, 53-58, 120-121, 267-273. For an entirely similar argument, focused on the context of Renaissance Florence, see

the same intellectual-artistic context for possible evidence of similar multi-layered attempts at treating paradox, made possible by the prevalence of perspective as a mode of representation after Masaccio; candidates here include Uccello, Piero della Francesca, Filippino Lippi, Leonardo da Vinci. All these enterprises have the potential to greatly contribute to our understanding of the intellectual context of the Renaissance by taking an approach with few precedents: namely, focusing on the issue of paradox and using ‘paradox-friendly’ methodologies for evaluating the works of thinkers and artists, instead of attempting to apply universally frameworks derived from ‘classical logic’ to a complex tradition that at various levels more or less explicitly rejects it or questions it.

---

Richard C. Trexler, “Florentine Religious Experience: The Sacred Image,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 19 (1972): 7-41.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### 1. Primary sources

*Acta Cusana. Quellen zur Lebensgeschichte des Nikolaus von Kues.* Vol. I.1: 1401 – May 17, 1437, ed. Erich Meuthen. Hamburg: Meiner, 1976.

*Acta Cusana. Quellen zur Lebensgeschichte des Nikolaus von Kues.* Vol. I.2: May 17, 1437 – December 31, 1450, ed. Herman Hallauer, Eric Meuthen. Hamburg: Meiner, 1983.

Alberti, Leon Battista. *Della Pittura*, ed. Luigi Mallé. Florence: Sansoni, 1950.

Cusanus, Nicolaus. *De Docta Ignorantia*. Ed. Ernst Hoffmann, Raymond Klibansky. Nicolai de Cusa opera omnia iussu et auctoritate academiae litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita, Vol. I. Leipzig: Meiner, 1932.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*. Ed. Raymond Kilbansky. Nicolai de Cusa opera omnia iussu et auctoritate academiae litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita, Vol. II. Hamburg: Meiner, 2007.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Sermones I (1430-1441)*, vol. 3, ed. Rudolf Haubst, Martin Bodewig. Nicolai de Cusa opera omnia iussu et auctoritate academiae litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita. Vol. XVI.3 (Sermones XI-XXI). Hamburg: Meiner, 1977.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Sermones I (1430-1441)*, vol. 4, ed. Rudolf Haubst, Martin Bodewig. Nicolai de Cusa opera omnia iussu et auctoritate academiae litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita. Vol. XVI.3 (Sermones XXII-XXVII). Hamburg: Meiner, 1984.

Vasari, Giorgio. *Le Vite de' piu eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi. Florence: Sansoni, 1906.

### 2. Secondary sources

Aiken, Jane. "The Perspective Construction of Masaccio's 'Trinity' Fresco and Medieval Astronomical Graphics." *Artibus et Historiae* 16, no. 31 (1995): 171-187.

Achtner, Wolfgang. "Infinity in Science and Religion." *Neue Zeitschrift fuer Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 47 (2005): 392-411.

Agosta, Silvio. "Mathematik und Perspektivitaet bei Cusanus und Alberti." In *Die Modernitaeten des Nikolaus von Kues*, ed. Inigo Bocken, Harald Schwaetzer, 187-215. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2013.

Ahl, Diane Cole. *The Cambridge Companion to Masaccio*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Albertson, David. *Mathematical Theologies: Nicholas of Cusa and the Legacy of Thierry of Chartres*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

- Beierwaltes, Werner. *Der Verborgene Gott: Cusanus und Dionysius*. Trierer Cusanus Lecture Series, 4. Trier: Paulinus Verlag, 1997.
- Belitto, Christopher M., Thomas Izbicki, Gerald Christianson, ed. *Introducing Nicholas of Cusa: A Guide to a Renaissance Man*. New York: Paulist Press, 2004.
- Bellucci, Roberto. Frosinini, Cecilia. "Masaccio: Technique in Context." In *The Cambridge Companion to Masaccio*, ed. Diane Cole Ahl, 105-122. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Berti, Luciano. "Masaccio 1422." *Commentari* 12 (1961): 84-107.
- Bocken, Inigo, "Sehen und gesehen werden. Unendlichkeit und Sinnlichkeit im 15. Jahrhundert." In *Kann das Denken malen? Philosophie und Malerei in der Renaissance*, ed. Inigo Bocken, Tilman Borsche, 95-110. Munich: Paderborn, 2010.
- \_\_\_\_\_, Tilman Borsche, ed. *Kann das Denken malen? Philosophie und Malerei in der Renaissance*. Munich: Paderborn, 2010.
- \_\_\_\_\_, and Harald Schwaetzer. *Die Modernitaeten des Nikolaus von Kues*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2013.
- Bond, Lawrence. "Nicholas of Cusa from Constantinople to *Learned Ignorance*. The Historical Matrix for the Formation of *De Docta Ignorantia*." In *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church: Essays in Memory of Chandler McCuskey Brooks*, ed. Gerald Christianson, Thomas M. Izbicki, 135-151. Leiden: Brill, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Nicholas of Cusa and the Reconstruction of Christology: The Centrality of Christology in the Coincidence of Opposites." In *Contemporary Reflections on the Medieval Christian Tradition*, ed. G. H. Shriver, 81-94. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1974.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*. New York: Paulist Press, 1997.
- Brient, Elizabeth. *The Immanence of the Infinite: Hans Blumenberg and the Threshold to Modernity*. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2002.
- Bynum, Caroline. *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*. Cambridge, Massachussets: MIT Press, 2011.
- Cata, Cesare. "*Perspicere Deum*: Nicholas of Cusa and the European Art of the Fifteenth Century." *Viator* 39, no. 1 (2008): 285-305.
- Carman, Charles. "Meanings of Perspective in the Renaissance: Tensions and Resolution." In *Renaissance Theories of Vision*, ed. Charles Carman, [first name] Hendrix, 31-44. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010.
- Cassirer, Ernst. *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*. Leipzig: Teubner, 1927.

- Casarella, Peter, ed., *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*. Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006.
- Christianson, Gerald, Thomas Izbicki, and Morimichi Watanabe, ed. *Nicolaus Cusanus: A Companion to his Life and his Times*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2011.
- Comanducci, Rita Maria. "L'altare Nostro de la Trinità': Masaccio's Trinity and the Berti Family." *The Burlington Magazine* 145 (2003): 14-21.
- Copleston, Frederick. *Medieval Philosophy*. New York: Harper and Row, 1961.
- Cristiani-Testi, Maria Laura. "La Trinità di Masaccio, Unità di Cosmo." *Critica d'Arte* 50, no. 4 (1985): 109-112.
- Damisch, Hubert. *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*. Tr. Janet Lloyd. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Deimling, Barbara. "Early Renaissance Art in Florence and Central Italy." In *The Art of the Italian Renaissance*, ed. R. Toman, 238-307. Cologne: Konemann, 1995.
- Dempsey, Charles. "Masaccio's 'Trinity': Altarpiece or Tomb?." *The Art Bulletin* 54, no. 3 (1972): 279-281.
- Dixon, Helen M. "Pomponio Leto and His Teachers Lorenzo Valla and Pietro Odo da Montopoli: Evidence from Work on Lucretius." *Italia Medioevale e Umanistica* 51 (2010): 261-301.
- Elkins, J. "Renaissance Perspectives." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53, no. 2 (1992): 209-230.
- Edgerton, Samuel. *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective*. New York: Basic Books, 1975.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Mirror, the Window and the Telescope: How Renaissance Perspective Changed our Vision of the Universe*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009.
- Field, J.V., R. Lunardi, and T. B. Settle. "The Perspective Scheme of Masaccio's Trinity Fresco." *Nuncius* 4, no. 2 (1989): 31-118.
- Filippi, Elena. "*Quasi pictor, qui diversos temperat colores, ut habeat sui ipsius imaginem*. Zu Cusanus und Dürer." In *Das Europäische Erbe im Denken des Nikolaus von Kues: Geistesgeschichte als Geistesgegenwart*, ed. Harald Schwaetzer and Kirstin Zeyer, 175-199. Muenster: Aschendorff, 2008.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Albrecht Dürers 'docta manus' und ihre cusanische Herkunft." In *Die Modernitäten des Nikolaus von Kues*, ed. Tom Müller, Matthias Vollet, 251-267. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2013.
- Flasch, Kurt. *Nikolaus Cusanus: Geschichte Einer Entwicklung: Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Cusanische Philosophie*. Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2008.

- Garin, Eugenio, "Cusano e i platonici italiani del Quattrocento." In *Niccolò da Cusa. Relazioni tenute al convegno interuniversitario di Bressanone nel 1960*, ed. Eugenio Garin, 75-100. Florence: Sansoni, 1962.
- Goffen, Rona. *Masaccio's 'Trinity'*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Goldberg, Jonathan. "Quattrocento Dematerialization: Some Paradoxes in a Conceptual Art." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35, no. 2 (1976): 153-168.
- Goldstein, Carl. "Rhetoric and History in the Italian Renaissance and Baroque." *The Art Bulletin* 73, no. 4 (1991): 611-652.
- Harries, Karsten. *Infinity and Perspective*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Power and Poverty of Perspective in Cusanus and Alberti." In *Cusanus: A Legacy of Learned Ignorance*, ed. Peter Casarella, 105-127. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006.
- Haubst, Rudolf. *Streifzüge in die Cusanische Theologie*. Muenster: Aschendorff, 1991.
- Hoff, Johannes. *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013.
- Hoffmann, Volker. "Masaccios Trinitätsfresko: Die Perspektivkonstruktion und ihr Entwurfsverfahren." *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 40. no. 1 (1996): 42-77.
- Hopkins, Jasper. "Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464): First Modern Philosopher?" In *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, XXVI: Renaissance and Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. A. French, H.K. Wettstein, 13-29. Boston: Blackwell, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1986.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Nicholas of Cusa on God as Not-other: A Translation and an Appraisal of De Li Non Aliud*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1979.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Nicholas of Cusa's Debate with John Wenck: A Translation and an Appraisal of De Ignota Litteratura and Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*. 3rd ed. Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Nicholas of Cusa's Dialectical Mysticism: Text, Translation, and Interpretive Study of De Visione Dei*. Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1985.
- Hudson, Hugh. "The Monuments of Florence, Real and Imagined, in the Early Renaissance: The Development of Single-Point Perspective in Painting." *PLACE* online journal (April 2007): 1-13. [www.carnesecchi.eu/Hugh\\_Hudson1.pdf](http://www.carnesecchi.eu/Hugh_Hudson1.pdf) (last accessed 28.07.2014).

- Hudson, Karen. *Becoming God: The Doctrine of Theosis in Nicholas of Cusa*. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2007.
- Koch, J., ed. *Humanismus, Mystic und Kunst in der Welt des Mittelalters*. Leiden: Brill, 1953.
- Mahoney, Edward P. "Metaphysical Foundations of the Hierarchy of Being According to Some Late-Medieval and Renaissance Philosophers." In *Philosophies of Existence Ancient and Medieval*, ed. P. Morewedge, 165-257. New York: Fordham University Press, 1982.
- Meuthen, Eric. *Nicholas of Cusa: A Sketch for a Biography*. Tr. David Crouner, Gerald Christianson. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2010.
- Miller, Clyde Lee. *Reading Cusanus: Metaphor and Dialectic in a Conjectural Universe*. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2003.
- Moffit-Watts, Pauline. *Nicolaus Cusanus: A Fifteenth-Century Vision of Man*. Leiden: Brill, 1982.
- Moritz, Arne. "Was kann Cusanus dafür, dass wir ihn modern interpretieren?" In *Die Modernitäten des Nikolaus von Kues*, ed. Tom Müller, Matthias Vollet, 467-485. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2013.
- Müller, Tom, Matthias Vollet, ed., *Die Modernitäten des Nikolaus von Kues: Debatten und Rezeptionen*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2013.
- Müller, Tom, *Perspektivität und Unendlichkeit: Mathematik und ihre Anwendung in der Frührenaissance am Beispiel von Alberti und Cusanus*. Regensburg: Roderer, 2010.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Der 'Florentiner Stammtisch', eine frühe 'Akademie' der Wissenschaften und der Künste." In *Das Europäische Erbe im Denken des Nikolaus von Kues: Geistesgeschichte als Geistesgegenwart*, ed. Harald Schwaetzer and Kirstin Zeyer, 89-128. Muenster: Aschendorff, 2008.
- Koch, J., ed. *Humanismus, Mystic und Kunst in der Welt des Mittelalters*. Leiden: Brill, 1953.
- Offermann, Ulrich. *Christus, Wahrheit des Denkens: eine Untersuchung zur Schrift 'De docta ignorantia' des Nikolaus von Kues*. Muenster: Aschendorff, 1991.
- Olds, Clifton. "Aspect and Perspective in Renaissance Thought: Nicholas of Cusa and Jan van Eyck." In *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church: Essays in Memory of Chandler McCuskey Brooks*, ed. Gerald Christianson, Thomas M. Izbicki, 251-264. Leiden: Brill, 1996.
- O'Rourke Boyle, Marjorie. "Cusanus at Sea – The Topicality of Illuminative Discourse." *The Journal of Religion* 71, no. 2 (1991): 180-201.
- Panofsky, Erwin. *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996.



- Pelikan, Jaroslav. *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 5 vols. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1973-1990.
- Perrig, Alexander. "Masaccios "Trinità" und der Sinn der Zentralperspektive." *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 21 (1986): 11-43.
- Priest, Graham, *Beyond the Limits of Thought*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *In Contradiction: A Study of the Transconsistent*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Doubt Truth to Be a Liar*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Procacci, Ugo. "Nuove testimonianze su Masaccio." *Commentari* 27 (1976): 233-4.
- Sanpaolesi, Piero. *Brunelleschi*. Milan: Edizioni per il Club del Libro, 1962.
- Santinello, Giovanni. *Il Pensiero di Nicolo Cusanu Nella Sua Prospettiva Estetica*. Padova: Liviana, 1958.
- Schlegel, Ursula. "Observations on Masaccio's Trinity Fresco in Santa Maria Novella." *The Art Bulletin* 45, no. 1 (1963): 19-33.
- Schneider, Wolfgang Christian. "Das cusanische Denken im Malen Jan van Eycks." In *Die Modernitäten des Nikolaus von Kues*, ed. Inigo Bocken, Harald Schwätzer, 215-251. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2013.
- Schwätzer, Harald, Kristin Zeyer, ed. *Das Europäische Erbe im Denken des Nikolaus von Kues: Geistesgeschichte als Geistesgegenwart*. Muenster: Aschendorff, 2008.
- Senger, H. G. *Die Philosophie des Nicolaus von Kues vor dem Jahre 1440. Untersuchungen zur Entwicklung einer Philosophie in der Fruehzeit des Nikolaus (1430-1440)*. Muenster: Aschendorff, 1971.
- Siedlmayer, M. "Nikolaus von Kues und der Humanismus." In *Humanismus, Mystic und Kunst in der Welt des Mittelalters*, ed. J. Koch, 1-38. Leiden: Brill, 1953.
- Simon, Holger. "Bildtheoretische Grundlagen des neuzeitlichen Bildes bei Nikolaus von Kues." *Concilium medii aevi* 7 (2004): 45-76.
- Simson, Otto V. "Über die Bedeutung von Masaccios Trinitätsfresko in S. Maria Novella." *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 8 (1966): 119-159.
- Spike, John T. *Masaccio*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1996.
- Trexler, Richard C. "Florentine Religious Experience: The Sacred Image." *Studies in the Renaissance* 19 (1972): 7-41.

- Ursic, Marko. "Paraconsistency and Dialectics as *coincidentia oppositorum* in the philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa." *Logique & Analyse* 41 (1998): 203-217.
- Van Ausdall, Kristen. "Art and Eucharist in the Late Middle Ages." In *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages*, ed. Ian Levy, Gary Macy and Kristen Van Ausdall, 541-618. Leiden: Brill, 2012.
- Verdon, Timothy. "Masaccio's Trinity: Theological, Social, and Civic Meanings." In *The Cambridge Companion to Masaccio*, ed. Diane Cole Ahl, 158-76. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Vredeman de Vries, Jan. *Perspective*. 1604-5. Reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1968.
- Watanabe, Morimichi. "The Origins of Modern Cusanus Research in Germany and the Establishment of the Heidelberg *Opera Omnia*." In *Concord and Reform: Nicholas of Cusa and Legal and Political Thought in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Gerald Christianson, Thomas M. Izbicki, Morimichi Watanabe, 35-60. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001.
- Wilder, Ken. "The Case for an External Spectator." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48, no. 3 (2008): 261-277.
- Ziebart, Karen. *Nicolaus Cusanus on Faith and the Intellect: A Case Study in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century fides-ratio Controversy*. Leiden: Brill, 2013.