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End Without End: Cosmology and Infinity in Nicholas of Cusa

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DESIRE, FAITH, and the DARKNESS OF GOD

Essays in Honor of Denys Turner

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End without End
Cosmology and Infinity in Nicholas of Cusa
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You, therefore, O God, are infinity itself, which alone
I desire in every desiring.
—Nicholas of Cusa, On the Vision of God

"A VAST AND INFINITE PROFUNDITY"

In preparation to pay tribute to the incomparable work of Denys Turner, hoping among other things to express the profound effect it has had on my own writing and thinking, I dug up my old notes from a lecture series he delivered at Cambridge University at the turn of the millennium titled “God and Creation in Mediaeval Theology.” There I found a number of recurring themes, like the tension between emanation and the ex nihilo, the manifold perils of voluntarism, and the difference between chalk and cheese. I also found some classic Denysisms, such as “Psalm 88 is a great, grumpy prayer,” “Zwingli is so hot on absence,” and “theology is in constant danger
of reinventing its own wheel.” But the phrase I found most often—which I had written down in nearly every lecture—was Saint Augustine’s astonished exclamation, “You were within me, but I was outside myself (intus eras et ego foris).”

Whether he was discussing Julian of Norwich, Marguerite Porete, or Meister Eckhart, Denys Turner’s thoughts about creation always seemed to lead him back to this intus eras, to the God who dwells within the one who searches for God—specifically, within the very faculty that does the searching. For Augustine, this faculty is “memory” (memoria), the innermost part of him, which he at one point calls “a vast and infinite profundity (penetrata amplecum et infinitum).” The infinity of this inwardsness is stated very quickly and not quite explained, but it seems to be a function of memory’s ability to hold together contradictory states. Memory can remember red, for example, in a dark room. It can remember sadness with gladness. And most strikingly for Augustine, memory can remember forgetting. I can remember having forgotten something, like my lunch or my keys; I can even remember that I am a generally forgetful person, and yet—this is what Augustine finds so amazing—I can remember all this forgetting without actually forgetting. When memory remembers forgetting, it makes present its own failure without itself failing, so that “both memory and forgetfulness are present.” And this coincidentia oppositorum plunges Augustine into a kind of astonished unknowing: “Who can find a solution to this problem?” he asks. “Who can grasp (comprehendet) what is going on?”

What is most incomprehensible to Augustine is that this infinite memory is within him—in fact, it is him—and yet it exceeds him. How, he marvels, can a finite being contain infinity? “This power is that of my mind (animus),” he writes, “and it is a natural endowment, but I myself cannot grasp the totality of what I am.” As the faculty that both constitutes and exceeds him, memory becomes the “place” he finally finds God. Augustine’s ungraspable God must dwell within the ungraspable core of the human subject, in the innermost part of him that is nevertheless beyond him. What this means, Augustine comes to realize, is that throughout his protracted search for God, God was there all along—and not just sitting quietly, waiting to be found, but rather as the power fueling the search itself. As Turner explains in The Darkness of God, “It is I who am ‘outside’ myself and it is the God within who initiates, motivates and guides the seeking whereby and in which God is to be found.” And the mechanism by which God drives the self back to itself, back to God, is desire.

Desire appears early in the Confessions. It is, in fact, the first function—if one can call it that—that Augustine attributes to humanity. “Man desires to praise you (laudare te vult homo),” he writes, establishing humanity from the outset as the “little piece of creation” that desires. More specifically, humanity is the little piece of creation that desires the creator, which is to say humanity desires its own unassimilable essence; humanity desires the God who both constitutes and exceeds it. This desire, moreover, is itself a gift of God: “You stir man to take pleasure in praising you,” Augustine exclaims, signaling that God Godself instills the desire that God alone fulfills.

Of course, God is not the only object of human desire; in fact, the first nine books of the Confessions chronicle Augustine’s chasing after people and pleasures that lead him from God. Yet Augustine will eventually conclude that these were false desires: the soul may think it wants admiration and physical affection and entertainment, but what it really wants is God. Denys Turner, admitting this argument sounds a bit forced, explains Augustine’s theological gymnastics in two ways. First, everything in the world reflects in some measure “the beauty and goodness of God”; therefore, the desire for anything “is always in some way a desire for God.” Second, everything other than God is finite and impermanent and therefore leaves the soul with a “dissatisfied longing” for something changeless and eternal. This longing only increases as the soul flits from false desire to false desire, and so by means of a kind of universal repulsion everything in creation propels the soul to the God whom it truly desires; in better-known words, “our hearts are restless until they find rest (requiem) in you.” Now, at first blush, these two explanations may seem contradictory: the former asserts the reflection of God in all created things, whereas the latter asserts the difference of God from all created things. In the former, we are attracted through creatures to God; in the latter, we are repelled from creatures to God. But we
have already seen this sort of divine transimmanence at work in the infinite interiority of memory, which God at once constitutes and exceeds. There seems, therefore, to be a kind of structural homology between memory and creation: God’s constitutive exceeding of the human subject recapitulates God’s constitutive exceeding of the cosmos itself.

Following this lead, I would like to turn to the work of Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64), whose cosmology is strikingly redolent of Augustine’s psychology. For the early Cusa, the infinite space that God both inhabits and exceeds is not memory but rather the universe itself: a boundless, ungraspable expanse whose centerless center is God. I would therefore like to suggest that we can see in Cusa’s cosmic meditations an “extrospective” ascent to God that mirrors Augustine’s introspective ascent; while Augustine turns from all things to the God within him (and thus to all things), Cusa turns from himself to the God within all things (and thus to himself).

Standing in the way of this interpretation, however, is a dramatic but little-noted bifurcation in Cusa’s work between the “mystical” and the cosmological. On the one hand, one hears about the Cusa who seeks learned ignorance, the coincidence of opposites, and the not-otherwise of God; on the other hand, one hears about the Cusa who took the earth from the center of the universe one hundred years before Copernicus. Cusa himself is not much help in this regard, because as stunning as his cosmic vision is in De docta ignorantia (1440), it does not reappear in any of his later, more contemplative writings. This absence is puzzling: it might simply signal a shift in Cusa’s interests, or it might be a consequence of Cusa’s having been brought up on heresy charges for—among other things—pantheism. While he defended his position, reasserted the careful distinctions he had made between God and creation, and was sufficiently cleared to be appointed a cardinal of the church in 1448, for one reason or another, Cusa rarely even mentions the universe in his later meditations on the soul’s ascent to God. The secondary literature tends to deepen this rift, focusing either on the theotic project or the proto-scientific project but rarely articulating their relationship to one another. In the work at hand, then, I would like to try to weave these two strands back together, suggesting that there may be what Jeannette Winterson would call a “gut symmetry” in Cusa between the spiritual and the cosmic, that the path of desire is bound, and thus unbound, by both intensive and extensive infinites.

IN SEARCH OF THE UNKNOWN GOD

If one is listening for such things, the first chapter of De docta ignorantia can be heard as an exceedingly wordy riff on the opening lines of the Confessions. “By a divine gift,” Cusa writes, “there is within all things a certain natural desire (desiderium) to exist in the best manner which the condition of each thing’s nature permits.” Like Augustine, then, Cusa begins with desire. One might notice, however, that he attributes this desire not to “man” but to “all things,” not to “a little piece of your creation” but to creation itself. Nicholas continues: “toward this end (finis) all things work . . . so that their desire may not be frustrated but may be able to attain rest (quietem attingere possit) in that which is the inclination of each thing’s natural desire.” Again, in this clunky prose we can detect a radical extension of the Augustinian person out to the universe: rather than “our hearts,” it is “all things” that seek rest from their restlessness. All things desire—well, for the moment, all Cusa tells us is that all things desire that—which-all-things-naturally-desire and that this “end” will give them “rest.”

But this progression from restlessness to rest begins to tremble toward the end of this chapter, when Cusa narrows down to what he calls the specific desire of humanity: the desire to know. “Since the desire in us for knowledge is not in vain,” he reasons, “surely then it is our desire to know that we do not know,” Now, viewed in one light, Cusa is sticking to the Augustinian script; we may recall that after proclaiming “our hearts” to be “restless until they find rest in you,” the Confessions dramatizes the inscrutability of this “you,” tumbling in paradox until Augustine confesses he is not sure he has said anything at all. Similarly, Cusa characterizes the “end” of human desire, in which it will finally “attain rest,” as unknowable. One
considerable difference, however, is that Cusa still has not mentioned God, much less designated God the end of this desire. So whereas Augustine desires an unknowable God, Cusa (in this passage, at least) desires unknowing itself: the desire to know desires to know that it does not know.

There is, then, a kind of gratifying frustration built into the very structure of Cusan desire: desire desires not to have the knowledge it desires—and only thereby to have it. “One will be the more learned,” Cusa concludes his introduction, “the more one knows that one is ignorant. It is toward this end (finis) that I have undertaken the task of writing a few words on learned ignorance.”24 But what sort of end is this end? Can the “desire in us for knowledge,” much less the desire of “all things,” find its rest in learned ignorance? More precisely, is learned ignorance an end at all? And how might the (un)learner attain it? Frustratingly, although the introduction to the De docta provokes these questions, the rest of the text never quite addresses them. Apart from a brief appeal in a concluding letter to Christ as “the end of all intellectual desires (finis intellectualium desideriorum),” the treatise drops the language of ends and desire after the first chapter.25 It goes on to elucidate the infinity of God, the “contracted infinity” of the universe, and the unity of both in Christ, but there is no explicit path through this theocsmology for the “intellectual desire” that begins and ends it.

Such a path begins to emerge in De quaerendo Deum (1445). “The end toward which you have come into this world,” Cusa tells an unnamed “brother in Christ,” “is to seek God.”26 This teleology, he explains, is the “premise” of Paul’s sermon on the unknown God (agnostos Theos/Deus ignotus) (Acts 17:16–34); in the face of their idols and shrines, Paul tells the Athenians that God has “appointed” human beings “to seek God[,] . . . grope for God and find God.”27 So where is God to be found? On the one hand, Paul assures us that God is “not far from each one of us. For ‘in him we live and move and have our being.”28 On the other hand, he tells us “we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone,” or anything in the realm of human conception.29 “Each time I read the Acts of the Apostles,” Cusa confesses, “I marvel at this process of thought.”30 What is marvelous is that God is both in everything and beyond everything; God is nearer than hands and feet and yet farther than our farthest imagination. What, then, are we to do? “If . . . the human being has come into this world (mundus) to seek God and . . . to find rest (qui-escervi), and since in this sensible and corporeal world one can neither seek or grope for God . . . how . . . can God be sought in order to be found?”31 The problem, in short, is that God has put us into a world full of things that are not God in order to find God. And the solution, Nicholas concludes, is that the world must reveal the God it also conceals: “Unless this world aided the seeker,” he ventures, “humankind would have been sent into the world to seek God in vain. Therefore, this world must assist whoever seeks God, and the seeker must know that neither in the world nor in all that a human conceives is there anything similar to God.”32 The world, in other words, must somehow draw the seeker to itself beyond itself; the world must both attract the seeker by virtue of God’s immanence to and repel the seeker by virtue of God’s transcendence of it.

The question, then, is how the seeker might find God through the world God both inhabits and transcends. What is the outward analogue of Augustinian inwardness? Different treatises offer different paths, but in each case Nicholas entreats the seeker to find something in the world that leads beyond the world. In De quaerendo, for example, this thing is the name Theos, which Paul proclaims to the Athenians. Of course, Nicholas is careful to say that “the name Theos is not itself the name of God, who surpasses every concept. Indeed, that which cannot be conceived remains ineffable.” And yet, he continues, “in the name Theos there is enfolded a certain path of seeking God (via quaedam quaendi complicatur) on which God may be found so that God may be groped for.”33 The path in this case unfolds etymologically. “Theos is taken from theorô,” Cusa tells us, “which means ‘I see’ and ‘I run.’ The seeker, therefore, has to run by means of seeing in order to be able to reach Theos, who sees all things.”34

In order to run and see the God who sees all things (but who presumably does not run), the seeker must construct a “ladder of ascent” from sensible vision through all the senses to reason (ratio) and finally to the intellect (intellectum), whereupon she will realize that
even intellectual vision falls short of the vision of God. But at the same time, Cusa cautions, she should remember that intellectual vision functions by means of the vision of God. For just as human intellect is the “light” of human reason, God “is the light of the intellect.” God, in other words, is the medium in which the intellect operates; God, moreover, is the medium in which anything operates at all, for “it is God through whom the creature has what it is.” Inasmuch, then, as all human knowing knows in the light of God and every object of human knowledge is in the light of God, God can be said to be “Contemplation Itself (ipsa speculatio).” In other words, Cusa concludes, in the work of contemplation, “it is not we ourselves who know, but rather it is God who knows in us.” Apart from the Pauline echo (Gal. 2:20), this passage recalls the Augustinian recognition that insofar as God is both in and beyond memory, God has been fueling the work of confession all along. Insofar as God is the light of the Cusan intellect, it is God who knows God when “we” ascend through God’s creatures to God, although even in this knowing, God remains “unknown.” Thus it is that something in the world (in this case, a name of God) “enfolds” a path beyond the world to the God who inhabits and exceeds the world—a God who illumines the intellect by keeping it darkened.

In De visione Dei (1453), a different visual path unfolds, taking its leave from an image rather than a word. “In the effort to transport you to divine things by human means,” Cusa begins, “I must use some kind of similitude. But among human works I have found no image more suitable for our purpose than that of an all-seeing figure.” Having sent an icon along with the letter that composes the treatise, Cusa walks “the abbot and brothers of Tegernsee” through a contemplative exercise. “Hang this up someplace,” he instructs them, “perhaps on a north wall. And you brothers stand around it, equally distant from it, and gaze at it. And each of you will experience that from whatever place one observes it the face will seem to regard him alone.” Gazing upon everything with the same intensity and the same steadfastness, the brothers will see the icon as “an image of infinity.” Like God, its gaze moves without moving, sees all things simultaneously, and above all “deserts no one. . . .” It has the same very diligent concern for the least creature as for the greatest, and for the whole universe.” Unlike God, however, the icon’s vision is limited (it cannot see behind itself), matter-bound, and impermanent (in fact, this particular icon seems to be “no longer extant”). By contemplating the icon, the brothers will therefore be stirred to address not the icon but God Godself, saying, “if you do not abandon me, the vilest of all, you will never abandon anyone.” The icon, in other words, leads the seeker through itself to the God it both resembles and falls short of.

As the treatise proceeds, however, it becomes clear that it is not just the icon that is an icon of God. A “lofty nut tree” provokes a similar ascent when Nicholas contemplates “this tree as a certain unfolding (explicatio) of the power of the seed and the seed as a certain unfolding of omnipotent power.” Just as the De quaerendo opens onto the realization that “God . . . is all that is in every existing thing,” then, the De visione begins to imagine every existing thing as a possible path to God. In the vision that culminates and concludes the treatise, in fact, Nicholas imagines “this entire world (universum hunc mundum)” as a canvas on which God paints God’s self-portrait. There is only one painter, he muses, “but the painter makes many images because the likeness of the painter’s infinite power can be unfolded more perfectly only in many figures. . . . Moreover if they were not innumerable, you, O infinite God, could not be known in the best possible way.” The path to the infinite God, then, is not to be found in memory or a divine name or intellect or an icon alone but rather in the innumeralis things of creation; in fact, if God were limited to a finite set of expressions, then our knowledge could never attain the unknowing that infinity provokes. “Therefore, by your gift, my God, I possess this whole visible world and all of scripture and all the ministering spirits in support of my advancing in the knowledge of you. All things rouse me to turn toward you (Omnia me excitant, ut ad de convenar),”

To summarize a bit before moving on, “all things” rouse Nicholas to turn toward God, first, because all things reflect God; second, because all things are not God; and third—this is where Nicholas moves beyond Paul—because all things are “innumerable.” There is
no end to the number of things the infinite God both is and is not. Indeed, this endlessness can itself be seen as a reflection and a falling short of divine infinity: it is like God insofar as it is endless but unlike God insofar as it is created. And yet in the reflection and the falling short alike, the endlessness of all things stirs the soul toward its infinite God. It is in this light, finally, that I propose to read Nicholas’s radically post-Copernican, pre-Copernican cosmology. The boundless and omnicentric universe he imagines is structured in such a way that the whole thing constitutes a path—and arguably, the greatest path, because it enfolds all paths—to God.

**CONTRACTING INFINITY**

In his *De caelo* (On the Heavens) (ca. 335 BCE), Aristotle sets forth a spherical model of the cosmos, with earth at the center and progressive rings of water, air, and fire surrounding it. Looking in particular to refute the atomist doctrine of an infinite universe filled with an infinite number of worlds, Aristotle calls upon his layered arrangement of the elements to prove that the cosmos must be both singular and finite. This earth must be the only one, he argues, because it is the nature of earth to move “down” and the nature of fire to move “up.” If there were another earth outside our ring of fire, then in moving down with respect to its own world, it would be moving up with respect to ours (i.e., away from our earth). Similarly, in moving up with respect to its own center, the otherworldly fire would be moving down with respect to ours. “This, however, is impossible,” Aristotle claims, because insofar as “moving downward” constitutes the essence of earth as such, its upward movement would make it not-earth. The same goes for fire: a downward-moving fire would not be fire at all. “It follows that there cannot be more worlds than one.” Moreover, this one world must be of limited extent because, as we can see, the “fixed stars” rotate around the earth once a day. Since they always return to the same place, they cannot extend out forever; as Aristotle puts it, “a body which moves in a circle must necessarily be finite.”

Thanks to Ptolemy’s fine-tuning in the second century, this model held through the entire medieval period. When Cusa wrote his *De docta* in the mid-fifteenth century, Europe still imagined the world as a cosmic nesting doll with the earth at the center, the sun and planets in concentric circles around it, and a halo of fixed stars orbiting the circumference once a day. These stars were held to be the *Primum Mobile*, set in motion by the Prime Mover to confer movement upon the rest of the cosmic bodies. This motive gradation allowed the Aristotelian cosmos to be mapped onto the Neoplatonic “chain of being,” so that physical position was thought to coincide with spiritual rank. “The higher an element [stood] in the cosmic stepladder,” Ernst Cassirer explains, “the closer it [was] to the unmoved mover of the world, and the purer and more complete its nature.” The realm of the stars, made of an incorruptible “fifth essence” (*quinta essentia*), was thought to be nearest to God, while the corruptible earth was farthest away (here we might recall Dante’s journey from the *inferno* at the center of the earth, up the purgatorial mountain, to the stars at the gates of paradise).

This cosmological model is usually thought to have been overthrown by Copernicus, whose heliocentric universe would provoke Inquisitorial outrage at the dawn of the seventeenth century. But for all the controversy it would generate, Copernicus’s heliocentric model did not depart all that radically from the geocentric model because it retained a motionless center and periphery. Copernicus, in effect, put the sun where the earth had been but left the fixed stars in place, thereby reaffirming the singularity and finitude of the cosmos. The thinker who genuinely abandoned Aristotelian cosmology was not Copernicus, who put the sun at the center of a bounded universe, but Nicholas of Cusa, who had declared one hundred years earlier that the universe had no center at all.

As do his other works, Cusa’s cosmological writing draws us in with a contemplative exercise. Picture yourself on a boat, Cusa suggests, sailing through a vast ocean. Unless you can see the shore recede behind you, or the waters rush beneath you, you will think you are at rest no matter how fast you may be moving. Indeed, even if you do gaze down at the waters flowing by, you may at first perceive
that they are moving while you are standing still. So it is with our position in the universe. Although the earth moves through a vast expanse of space, we perceive ourselves to be at rest in the middle of the world because we lack an unmoved point of reference. Vaulting over Copernicus, Cusa goes on to say that the same holds for every other cosmic body: everything moves in imperfect circles around its neighbors (2.12.163–64). And yet, precisely because nothing is at rest, “it always appears to every observer, whether on the earth, the sun, or another star, that one is... at an immovable center of things and that all else is being moved” (2.12.162). Nothing is at the center of the universe for Cusa, which means that everything is at the center—from its own perspective. Even those stars that we see at the outer edge of the universe occupy the center of creation from their own vantage point, so that their inhabitants will think that we orbit them. Contra Aristotle, then, Cusa insisted that this world is not “the only one”; rather, there are a vast number of “earths,” each of them full of inhabitants who think themselves at the center of what looks like a nesting-doll cosmos.

A mobile earth, elliptical orbits, the relativity of motion, extraterrestrial life, multiple worlds—each of these postulates is a feature of Cusa’s systematic destruction of the tidy Aristotelian cosmos. But his most radical teaching, on which all the rest depend, is that this expanse of mobile bodies extends indefinitely. Of course, this remarkable new idea was not exactly new; Leucippus and Democritus had taught as much in the fifth century BCE. Four hundred years later, Lucretius would prove the infinity of the atomists’ universe by entrusting us to hurl a spear at whatever we might think to be its boundary. If nothing stops the spear, he argued, then there is no boundary; if something stops the spear, then there is something beyond the boundary. Either way, the boundary would not be a boundary, which means that the universe must be infinite. Cusa offers a similar line of reasoning in the De docta, saying that “the universe (universum) is limitless (interminatum), for nothing actually greater than it, in relation to which it would be limited, can be given” (2.1.97). In other words, since the universe is all that is, there cannot be anything outside it to bind it.

That having been said, unlike the atomist universe, the Cusan universe is not exactly infinite. To be sure, Cusa reasons, the universe cannot be called finite, “since it lacks boundaries within which it is enclosed,” but neither can it be called infinite, because unlike God, it is not “from itself” (2.11.156; 2.2.98). Since the source of its being lies beyond itself, the universe cannot, strictly speaking, be called infinite. And yet insofar as it “embraces all things that are not God,” it is not finite either (2.1.97). To account for this finite sort of infinity, Cusa borrows some terminology from Thomas Aquinas, who distinguishes in his Disputationes between the “negative infinite which simply has no limit” and the “private infinite... which should have limits naturally but which lacks them.” Cusa attributes the former to God and the latter to the universe: God has God’s reason for being within Godself and is thus “negatively” infinite, whereas the universe has its reason for being outside itself and is thus “privatively” infinite. In Cusa’s own language, God is the “absolute” infinite, whereas the universe is a “contracted” infinite—a concrete, material, and for that reason restricted, infinite (2.4.113). But this very difference between God and the universe constitutes their inexorable relation: in its contracted infinity, the universe exists as a created reflection of God. Like God, it has no limits; like God, it contains everything that is, as well as the seeds of what might yet be. “It is as if the Creator had spoken, ‘Let it be made,’” writes Cusa, “and because God, who is eternity itself, could not be made, that was made which could be made, which would be as much like God as possible” (2.2.104). Emerging from the very being of God, the universe is the fullest possible expression (explicatio) of the divine enfolding (complicatio), “a concrete likeness of God unfolded in the diversity and multiplicity of space and time.”

This likeness is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the dizzying geometry of De docta ignorantia. As I have already mentioned, the Cusan universe has neither center nor circumference; rather, it appears to have its center wherever an observer finds herself, and its circumference as far as she can see. Our sense of the universe is thus irredulously perspectival. And yet, Cusa promises, we can visualize the whole if we are willing to shatter our spatial sensibilities.
of creation (2.11.157). But insofar as God is equally proximate to all parts of creation, the universe does indeed have a center: “God is the center of the earth,” Cusa proclaims, “of all the spheres, and of all things that are in the world.” (2.11.157; emphasis added). And so in this very particular sense, the center of the world is not nowhere, but everywhere, because God is everywhere.

Even as he asserts this principle, however, Cusa adds a qualification—just in case we’ve missed the context: “the world machine will have, one might say (quasi), its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere, for its circumference and its center is God, who is everywhere and nowhere” (2.12.162; emphasis added). So just as the universe is finite in one respect and infinite in another, its center is nowhere on its own but everywhere “in God.” This quasi-omnicentricism establishes the universe as the strongest possible imago dei, a concrete expression of divine being itself. Yet we should note that this likeness only holds insofar as God occupies the center(s) of the very universe that resembles God. Cusa, in other words, is shattering any simple mirror game between God and the universe by folding God into God’s own image, as its omnicentric center. The world does not resemble a God that stands outside it; it resembles God only insofar as it embodies God, everywhere in the universe, equally.

It is with this insight that Cusa truly demolishes the graduated cosmos of his Aristotelian predecessors. God is not meditated down through the heavenly ranks to the lowly earth at its center; rather, God is directly present to every part of the boundless universe. As Cassirer explains it, “there is no absolute above and below, and . . . no body is closer or farther from the divine, original source of being than any other; rather, each is immediate to God.” For Cusa, there is no privileged place in the universe, no distinction between the astral and sublunar spheres. And so the order of things is not a static hierarchy under an extracosmic God; instead, it is a dynamic holography in which God is fully and equally present to everything in creation. This radical indwelling is, for Cusa, what it means for God to create in the first place: “creating,” he ventures, “seems to be not other than God’s being all things” (2.2.101). If all things exist as the

“You must make use of your imagination as much as possible,” he advises, “and enfold the center with the poles” (2.11.161). The result will be something like a sphere whose center coincides with its periphery. Only if you can picture such an unpictureable thing, will you begin to “understand something about the [universal] motion of the universe” (2.11.161). Moreover, you will begin to understand the likeness between the universe and its creator. For insofar as God is both omnipresent and boundless, God Godself can be thought of as “an infinite sphere, whose center is everywhere, whose circumference is nowhere.”

This image of an infinite sphere is not new: it had appeared in the work of Alain de Lille, Saint Bonaventure, and Thomas Aquinas and throughout the sermons of Meister Eckhart (from whom Cusa most likely picked it up) to describe the ineffable being of God. What is new is that Cusa is applying what had been a theological metaphor to the creation itself, thereby rendering the universe just as incomprehensible as its creator. “Therefore enfold these different images,” he entreats us, “so that the center is the zenith and vice versa, and then . . . you come to see that the world and its motion and shape cannot be grasped, for it will . . . have its center and circumference nowhere” (2.11.161; emphasis added, translation altered slightly). Yet even here, we should note, Cusa is careful not quite to identify the infinite sphere of the world with the infinite sphere of God: God, he has told us, is a sphere with its “center everywhere,” whereas this passage calls the universe a sphere with its center nowhere. And so just as we saw the universe’s difference from God secure its resemblance to God, we now see the resemblance ratchet up the difference: both are infinite spheres, but God is omnicentric, whereas the universe has no center at all.

But then again, can the universe not be said to have as many centers as there are positions within it, and is it not in this sense omnicentric? The issue, once again, boils down to perspective. The universe has no absolute center within itself because there is no body in the universe that is equidistant to each of its “poles.” “Precise equidistance to different points cannot be found outside God,” Cusa explains, which is to say that God alone is equally proximate to all parts
image of God, then it is not the case that God is mediated by some things (intelligences, Reason, Man, etc.) to other things (matter, the passions, women, nonhuman animals). Rather, he writes, “God communicates without difference or envy,” so that every creature becomes a “perfect” image of God: “every creature is, as it were, a finite infinity or created god, so that it exists in the way in which this could best be” (2.2.104). Precisely because God immediately communicates Godself to every creature, however, every creature also mediates God to every other creature. Because God is in each thing as the being of each thing, everything mediates God to everything. And insofar as “everything” as such is the universe itself, Cusa suggests, “God is in all things as if [quasi] by mediation of the universe” (2.5.117). “As if” by mediation of the universe, it is not just the case that God is in all things and all things are in God but also that “all things are in all things” (1.15.118; emphasis added).

DESIRING INFINITY

When Nicholas exclaims in the De visione Dei that “all things rouse me to turn toward you,” we can therefore hear him saying not only that any thing (whether it be a name or a leafy nut tree) can be an icon of God but also that the endless run of “all things”—the universe itself—is an icon of God. Like the “all-seeing image,” gazing equally upon each brother, the universe is equally present to every body within it: centered as much around poor demoted Pluto as it is around the earth or the sun. Like God Godself, the universe contains all that is and all that is to come, and like God, it has no boundaries, except God. Contemplating the universe, then, we are propelled both by its resemblance to God (in its boundless omniscience) and by its difference from God (who is its boundary and center). Drawn to the boundaries of the unbounded universe, we collide head-on with God Godself, the center and periphery of all things as such, and the “end” of all creaturely desire. But to circle back to the opening concerns of the De docta (“all theology is circular” [1.21.66], Nicholas will tell us, proleptically echoing Denys Turner and his reinvented wheels), how can desire find its end in such endlessness? Or as Nicholas exclaims in De visione Dei, “My God, you are absolute infinity itself, which I perceive to be the infinite end, but I am unable to grasp how an end without an end is an end.”

Like Augustine, Nicholas figures the desire for anything as a desire for God because God is “the form of every desirable thing (forma omnis desiderabilis),” and as such both with and beyond every desirable thing.22 Pushing far past Augustine, Nicholas will go on in De li non alius (1461) to say that insofar as God is in each thing and each thing is in God, each thing in God is God.23 But at the same time, insofar as God is the form of each thing, each thing in itself is nothing, and nothing is infinitely different from God. Therefore, all things exist in, through, and as the “infinite power” in whose image all things are made—and yet all things are irreducibly not-God. This, as we have seen, is particularly the case with the universe itself, whose “contracted” infinity falls infinitely short of the “uncontracted infinity” it nevertheless embodies most fully (insofar as it embraces all created things, each of which is a finite infinity). But for Nicholas, it is precisely this constitutive shortfall that sustains the desire that desires any “desirable thing.” The farther the soul ascends in any given contemplation, “the more infinite [God] appears,” which is to say the more incomprehensible it comprehends God to be.24 And the more incomprehensible it comprehends God to be, the more it delights in the God whom it desires—precisely because there is always more God to desire. This, Nicholas ventures, could even be the reason God keeps Godself hidden: “the reason you, O God, are unknown to all creatures is so that they may have in this most sacred ignorance a greater rest (quietus) as if in an incalculable and inexhaustible treasure.”25 And here again, we find the Augustinian promise of rest, which again leaves us wondering, what kind of “rest” can the soul find in the incalculable and inexhaustible? How can an end without end be an end?

But then again, if the end were an end, that is, if desire desired something finite, then desire itself would come to an end once it attained its end. Desire would desire the end of desire, which Nicholas deems quite impossible, “for how could the appetite desire not to
exist?" Therefore, desire qua desire can only desire an end without end, which is once more to say that desire desires God alone. And God sustains this desire infinitely, by both giving and withholding Godself: "You come down, Lord, that you may be comprehended, and you remain incomprehensible and infinite, and unless you remained infinite, you would not be the end of desire." In this sense, then, the task of desire is not to move from restlessness to rest but rather to move from "a certain determinate rest" in the finite to a restless rest in the infinite, where "the opposition of opposites is without opposition" and desire finds its end in an end without end.

Insofar as the end of desire is endless, the path of desire is enfolded within the endless universe itself—both in the innumerable sum of things and in each thing insofar as it enfolds all things. There is, then, a kind of extrospective journey in Cusa that mirrors the introspective journey in Augustine: while Augustine moves from created things to the "vast and infinite profundity" within, Cusa moves from himself to the vast and infinite creation. But as Denys Turner would be the first to point out, a mirror image does not differ in kind or in magnitude from that which it mirrors; it is the same image, inverted. The only reason Cusa's "intellectual desire" is able to process cosmologically out to the infinite is that, like everything else in creation, the intellect bears the image of the cosmos that imperfectly images the God who dwells within it.

Cusa both suggests and covers over this connection between the intellect and the universe in De quaerendo Deum, saying that "our intellectual power embraces every corporeal and measurable nature"—a function that the De docta attributed to the universe. And yet the De quaerendo goes on to say that human intellect "surpasses all capacity of the whole sensible world, and not only of this world but also of an infinite number of worlds (infinitorum mundorum)." Perhaps because he has changed his mind, or perhaps in an effort to avoid another accusation of pantheism, Cusa is now elevating human intellect over the universe, saying that insofar as it embraces all things (apart from God), it "surpasses" the capacity of even an infinite number of worlds and bears the image of God Godself. But we will recall that in the De docta, the power that "embraces all things that are not God," contains an infinite number of worlds, and bears the fullest image of God, is the universe itself. Regardless of the reason for Cusa's mysterious demotion of "the whole sensible world," we can nevertheless see a clear homology between the intellect and the universe it contemplates: each extends out boundlessly in a dazzling but imperfect imitatio dei. And if we recall that for the early Cusa "all things are in all things" and that for the late Cusa each thing in God is God, we can go even further and locate this homology in every creature (in fact, at the moment that the De quaerendo compares the human intellect to the divine intellect, it also compares it to a mustard seed). Just as the icon gazes with equal care upon the Abbot and the gnat, just as the universe is as fully centered around Pluto as the sun, the image of God, and therefore the path to God, runs as surely through the mustard seed as it runs through the universe.

The trick, then, as it is for Augustine, is not to abandon created things for God—not after all, God is the medium in which created things are—but rather to find a way through them to God, which is also to say more deeply into the world-in-God-in-the-world. More precisely, the work of desire is to allow God to draw us through God's boundless creation to the God who both constitutes and exceeds it—the God whom all things desire in the desire of all things. And for Nicholas, this is the point of the whole holographic cosmos: God has unfolded creation in such a way that anything and everything enfolds a path to God, leading desire "by the eternal beginning... to the end without end." Or as Denys Turner might put it, in the desire of all things "there is some echo, however faint, of God."

NOTES

2. Augustine of Hippo, Confessions, 10.8.15; emphasis added.
6. Ibid., 10.8.15; emphasis added.
7. As Turner explains it, "the language of ‘interiority’ is, as it were, self-subverting: the more ‘interior’ we are, the more our interiority opens out to that which is inaccessibly ‘above’ and ‘beyond’ it" (Turner, Darkness of God, 69).
8. Ibid., 59.
10. Ibid.; emphasis added.
12. Ibid.
13. Augustine of Hippo, Confessions, 1.1.1; translation altered slightly.
14. This duplicity reflects a tension that runs throughout the Confessions: on the one hand, sin turns from God to "external things"; on the other hand, God is in all external things (which are also in God) (Augustine of Hippo, Confessions, 10.27.38; 2.1.1; 1.2.2–3). On the one hand, turning toward oneself is the root of all sin; on the other hand, turning toward oneself is the work of conversion (2.6.13–14; 10.27.38). The trick, for Augustine, is neither to fetishize nor to abandon created things but rather to love them in the right way, which is to say in God: "Let these transient things be the ground on which my soul praises you, ‘God creator of all.’ But let it not become stuck in them... If physical objects give you pleasure, praise God for them and return love to their Maker... If souls please you, they are being loved in God" (4.10.15–4.12.18).
17. A telling exception to this rule can be found in De li non aliud (1462), in which Cusa writes that 'the universe must not be considered as the goal (finis) of all things; for were it the goal of all things, it would be God' (Nicholas of Cusa, On Not Other, in Nicholas of Cusa on God as Not-Other: A Translation and an Appraisal of "De li non aliud" [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979], 77).
21. Nicholas of Cusa, On Learned Ignorance, 1.1.2.
22. Ibid., 1.1.4.
24. Nicholas of Cusa, On Learned Ignorance, 1.1.4.
25. Ibid., 3.letter.264.
27. Nicholas of Cusa, On Seeking God, 1.17.
30. Nicholas of Cusa, On Seeking God, 1.18.
31. Ibid.


53. Ibid., 276b12–17.

54. Ibid., 271b26.


57. Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake for his Cusan-inflected, neatomist Copernicanism in 1600, and Galileo was placed under house arrest for seeming to prefer the heliocentric model in 1633. See Maurice A. Finocchiaro, “Philosophy versus Religion and Science versus Religion: The Trials of Bruno and Galileo,” in Giordano Bruno: Philosopher of the Renaissance, ed. Hilary Gatti (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002).

58. Although Copernicus himself retained the “fixed stars” (fixing them even more, in fact, because if the earth turns once a day, then the stars must be motionless), those who followed him were quick to see that if the stars did not rotate, Aristotle’s only argument for cosmic finitude was void. The first Copernican to ascribe infinity to the Copernican model was the English mathematician and astronomer Thomas Digges, whose translation of the De revolutionibus featured a diagram in which the stars, rather than being confined to a thin ring around the cosmos, were extended out indefinitely. See Hilary Gatti, “Giordano Bruno’s Copernican Diagrams,” Filozofski vestnik 25, no. 2 (2004).

59. Nicholas of Cusa, On Learned Ignorance, 2.12.162. Subsequent references are cited internally.

60. With his suggestion that planetary courses are not quite circular, Cusa anticipates Kepler’s discovery of elliptical orbits. Like his other “discoveries,” this was not based on observation but rather theological conviction; circular orbits would entail “precise equidistance” between a central body and its satellites, and “precise equidistance to different points cannot be found outside God, for God alone is infinite equality” (On Learned Ignorance, 2.11.157).

61. Cusa believed that all the “stellar regions” beyond our own were most likely “inhabited,” imagining that the residents of the sun were likely to be “more solar, bright, illuminated, and intellectual, even more spiritual than those on the moon, who are more lunar, and that those on the earth, who are more weighty” (On Learned Ignorance, 2.12.172).

64. "The universe cannot be negatively infinite, although it is boundless and thus privatively infinite, and in this respect neither finite nor infinite" (Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, 2.1.97).
67. See Brient, "Intensive Infinite," 579.
68. Cf. Nicholas’s statement earlier in the *De docta*: "derived being . . . is not understandable, since the being from which it exists is not understandable" (2.2.100).
69. See Brient, "Intensive Infinite," 592.
72. Ibid., 16.67.
73. Having established at great length that "in the sky . . . God is not other than the sky," Nicholas mentions briefly that the converse is also true: "the sky . . . in Not-other is not-other" (Nicholas of Cusa, *On Not Other*, 51).
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid., 16.68.
77. Ibid.; emphasis added.
80. Ibid.
81. Cf. *De coniecturis* (1442–43), which calls "the human mind" a "lofty likeness of God" because it makes rational entities "just as the Divine Mind" makes "real" entities (Nicholas of Cusa, "On Surmises" [*De coniecturis*], 1.1.5). Here too there is no mention of the universe.
82. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, 1.2.1.
83. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, 3.44.

The Darkness of God and the Light of Life
*Augustine, Pseudo-Denys, and Eckhart*

KARL HEFTY

If Christian theology speaks of what can be known of God, it does so in a way that also acknowledges the limits of this knowledge.1 God can be known insofar as God has been revealed in scripture and creation, but as creator and source God remains unknown and infinitely surpasses all concepts and categories. The traditions of so-called negative theology go further, however, and affirm that God can be known even beyond these limits, since to know that God exceeds them, in a sense, is already to know something more of God. Whatever can be affirmed truthfully of God in a higher sense must also be denied truthfully of God, and these denials too must also finally be denied, so that the height of knowledge of God can also be called a form of darkness.2 As the knowledge of God increases, so does the need to affirm that God exceeds all knowing.3

In the modern era, as the concept of experience comes to play a more prominent role in philosophy, another kind of limit to knowledge arrives on the scene. It is not a limit that follows from the transcendence of God as creator but a limit rooted in the very structure