

CHAPTER FOUR

NICHOLAS OF CUSA'S METAPHYSIC OF CONTRACTION

1. When we survey the currently prevailing British and North American interpretations of Nicholas of Cusa's metaphysics, we find a family resemblance between them. Even though, perhaps, there is not a single feature common to them all, all nonetheless paint an uncommonly singular picture. In this picture Nicholas is seen as professing that God is in some sense identical with the world, even though in some sense He is also different from it. There is a tendency to think of Nicholas as maintaining that reality, though unitary, has two sides—the one infinite and the other finite. These two aspects, it is thought, are interrelated in such way that (1) the Infinite God is alone the Essence of all finite things and (2) the finite world, as well as each thing in it, is a contraction of the Infinite God—i.e., is God in a contracted state. Now, if God is the Essence of all finite things, then finite things have no essence of their own, other than God. That is, they have no *positive* being other than God's being. Accordingly, they differ from one another only accidentally. Considered contractedly, God *is* the world; considered absolutely, the world *is* God. Creatures, then, are theophanies: i.e., they are manifestations of God—or better, they are God in His finite mode of existence. Thus, every creature is *deus creatus*, or *infinitas finita*—God in His created, finite state. It is true that Nicholas uses the Aristotelian terminology of *substance* and *accident*, *essence* and *existence*, *universal* and *particular*, *form* and *matter*,

genus and *species*; but this terminology is mere window dressing—the vestige of a metaphysics from which he more or less disassociates himself. If God is the Essence of all things and if all things are a contraction of God, then God is present in all things and all things are present in God. In God each thing is God; and in each thing God is that which this thing is absolutely, for the core of each thing is Being itself, or God. Furthermore, all things are present in all things, because the Divine Essence of all things is wholly present in each thing. So in last analysis, Nicholas's metaphysics verges on pantheism: although no particular finite thing is the Infinite God, still if we remove from any particular thing its finite determinations, what we are left with is Absolute Quiddity.

Over against this interpretation is the interpretation that has emerged from the criticisms presented in the foregoing chapters:¹ God and the world are not *in any sense* identical; for God is not, *tout court*, the Essence of all things, nor is each thing a contraction of God. Because each thing has its own being, it is not the case either that a thing's entire positive being is God or that one thing differs from another only accidentally. Accordingly, the Aristotelian language is meant to be taken seriously, not just decoratively. Although God is present in all things, He is not each thing's absolute being or absolute quiddity; for a finite thing has only a contracted quiddity. The world is not God in His finite, created state; a creature is a god "as it were" but is not God-qua-finite. The Infinite and the finite are not two sides of the same reality. Instead, they are different realities—though the one is totally dependent upon the other, in an ultimate sense. The world is a contracted *reflection* of God's being; but a reflection of God's being is not God's being—whether contractedly or otherwise. God is present in all things in such way that all things are present in Him, so that each thing is present in each other thing. However, God is not mingled with His creation but remains His absolutely simple and incontractible self. Therefore, there is no ten-

dency toward pantheism.

2. In exploring this *second* interpretation more fully, we might best proceed by asking ourselves how the *first* interpretation could have come to prevail and how it could have remained predominant over so many years. The answer is not so very hard to recognize: Nicholas's terminology lends itself to misunderstanding; for Nicholas often uses terms without explicitly indicating what they mean. Let us take a paradigmatic example—viz., the terms "*contractio*," "*contractum*," and "*contrahere*." The closest Nicholas comes to explicating any one of these terms is at *DI* II, 4 (116:19-20): "*Contraction* means contraction to something, so as to be this or that."² But, of course, this is by no means a definition. So in order to understand these terms we must patiently examine their use in Nicholas's various treatises. This is no easy task. For example, in each of the following passages, the respective cognate of "*contrahere*" has a different signification or a different nuance:

- (1) ". . . *circinus et tamen extenditur et contrahitur* . . ." [*De Mente* 9 (90:1)]: "the compass is nevertheless both extended and *contracted* . . ."
- (2) ". . . *Domine, qui non contrahis bonitatem tuam maximam, sed largissime effundis in omnes capaces*" (*De Visione Dei* 7): ". . . [You], O Lord, who do not *constrict* Your maximum goodness but most generously shed it on all who are able to receive it."
- (3) "*Est igitur Christus, per quem secundum humanitatis naturam immortalitatem nostra humana natura contraxit*" [*DI* III, 8 (228:12-13)]: "Therefore, Christ is the one through whom, according to the nature of His humanity, our human nature *has contracted* [i.e., come to possess] immortality."³
- (4) "*Mens vero tanto acutius mensurat quanto magis posita est in actu, quanto se plus a corpore separat et organa sensuum claudit et absolvendo se a corpore ad spirituale suum esse et centrale contrahit*" (*Complementum Theologicum* 11, Paris ed.): "But

the mind measures more accurately the more it becomes actualized and separates itself from the body and closes off the organs of the senses and, freeing itself from the body, *restricts* itself to its own spiritual and central being."

- (5) "*Sed in corrupta et alterata ratione iudicium eius corruptum est, ut videmus, quando auctoritati ratio alligata est. Tunc enim alterata est et contracta a sua puritate, et secundum eam corruptum fit iudicium*" [*De Coniecturis* II, 16 (170:11-14)]: "But in reason which is corrupted and altered, reason's judgment is corrupted, as we see when reason is bound to authority. For then it is altered and *is diminished* in its purity, and in accordance with reason, the judgment becomes corrupted."
- (6) "... *si maximum contractum ad speciem . . .*" [*DI* III, 2 (190:6-7)]: "if a maximum which is *contracted* to a species . . ." Cf. *DI* I, 6 (16:1-2): "*Contrahamus maximum ad esse et dicamus: maximo esse nihil opponitur . . .*": "Let us *contract* maximum to being, and let us say: it is not the case that anything is opposed to maximum being . . ."
- (7) "*Solus deus est absolutus, omnia alia contracta*" [*DI* II, 9 (150:9-10)]: "God alone is absolute; all other things are *contracted* [i.e., restricted]."

So the various cognates of "*contrahere*" are used by Nicholas in a number of different senses,⁴ as well as in several different idioms ("*contrahitur ad . . .*,"⁵ "*contrahere a . . .*,"⁶ "*contrahitur in . . .*"⁷). Sometimes "*contrahere*" means the opposite of physical expansion; sometimes it means contraction in the sense in which someone is said to contract a disease. But its general philosophical use seems to be along the lines of 6 and 7: contraction in the sense of restriction.

But to say this is still not to have said enough. For Nicholas's general philosophical use of "*contrahere*" includes—besides the passive and the active senses in 6 ("to be restricted to a species," "to restrict maximum to being") and

the contradistinction to "absolute" in 7—the sense of "to receive in a restricted way." This latter use is found most clearly in *De Dato Patris Luminum* 2 (102:8). Indeed, in 102:5-9 Nicholas interchanges "*recipit*," "*contrahit*," and "*participat*":

Angeleitias enim secundum descensum illum, qui angeleitias dicitur, universalem essendi formam recipit. Humanitas secundum illum descensum, qui humanitas dicitur, universalem essendi formam contrahit. Leoninitas secundum illum descensum absolutam formam participat.

In this context even participation is regarded as a *received* sharing. Moreover, Nicholas does not hesitate to say, at 101:6, "*recipit contracte*" instead of either "*recipit*" or "*contrahit*" alone.⁸ Yet, the very word "*recipit*" is misleading, since it suggests that a receiver exists prior to, or separate from, the receiving. In his more careful moments Nicholas takes pains to dispel this misconception.⁹

Having examined Nicholas's typical uses of "*contrahere*," we are still a long way from being clear about many of his statements. For example, the quotation which is inset in the foregoing paragraph is supposed to illustrate "how it is that God is the Universal Form of being for all forms—[a Form] which the specific forms receive by way of a descent. [They do] not [receive it] universally and absolutely, as it is and as it gives itself, but [only] with specific contraction."¹⁰ We may consider the inset quotation in conjunction with a later statement: "Every gift was eternally with the Father, from whom it descends when it is received. For the Giver gave always and eternally; but [the gift] was received only with a descent from eternity. Now, such a descent is a contraction of eternity into duration that has a beginning."¹¹ These passages sound as if Nicholas were teaching that God's eternity and God's being are contractible, in the sense of restrictable. Yet, as we noted in earlier chapters, this cannot be what is meant, since Nicholas states repeatedly that God is absolute and altogether free of contraction.¹² Thus, the key phrase above is "as it is and as it gives itself."

Specific forms, such as the form *humanity*, do not contract—i.e., do not receive in a restricted way—God's being *as it is*. Indeed, the words “not . . . as it is” and “by way of a descent” imply that the specific forms contract—i.e., receive in a restricted way—a *likeness* of God's being and of God's eternity.¹³ Similarly, Eternity itself is absolute, uncontracted, and uncontractible;¹⁴ duration, therefore, is not Eternity in a contracted state but is a contracted *likeness* of Eternity. By comparison, when Nicholas refers to every created thing as “a finite infinity, as it were,”¹⁵ he does not mean that Infinity itself is contracted, or delimited.¹⁶ The words “as it were” signal a *modus loquendi*: every finite creature “resembles”¹⁷ the Infinite God in that it is as perfect as it can be.

Still other *prima facie* perplexities occur vis-à-vis Nicholas's terminology. We have seen, for example, the statement that Infinity is not contractible to anything; Infinite Goodness, says Nicholas, is not Goodness but is only Infinity—and similarly for other characteristics.¹⁸ And yet, Nicholas persists in calling God *Goodness*,¹⁹ while recognizing that “goodness” is here to be understood only in a symbolic sense.²⁰ However, he also refers to God in other ways—ways that tend to engender some confusion. In *De Coniecturis* II, 16 (167:13) we find the phrase “*divinus absolutissimus intellectus*”—even though, strictly speaking, God is not *intellect* any more than He is *goodness*. In *De Visione Dei* 9 God is called both *humanitas incontracta* and *homo absolutus*; in *De Visione Dei* 1 He is called *verus incontractus visus*; and in *De Visione Dei* 2 this *incontractus visus* is called a *contractio incontractibilis* and a *contractio contractionum*. But, of course, uncontracted humanity is not humanity as we understand and signify *humanity*; and absolute seeing is not seeing, as we understand and signify *seeing*. Similarly, though God is called Incontractible Contraction and Contraction of contractions, He is not thought by Nicholas to be contraction in any sense implying that He is contracted. Nicholas's penchant for the paradoxical,

together with his shunning of Scholastic caviling, leads to these innovative expressions. He is, no doubt, encouraged in this direction by the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius.

Special mental effort is required in order to keep the fluctuation in Nicholas's language straight in one's own mind. For example, even though Nicholas refers to God as *humanitas incontracta*, i.e., *humanitas absoluta*, he also uses the latter expression when not referring to God.²¹ Furthermore, he speaks not only of degrees of contraction²² but also of degrees of absoluteness.²³ Though God is “*unitas penitus absoluta*”²⁴ and “*absolutissima forma*,”²⁵ He is also spoken of—without the superlative—as “*unitas absoluta*”²⁶ and “*absoluta forma*.”²⁷ Moreover, Nicholas sometimes uses “*absolutum*” where what he means is “*multum absolutum*,” i.e., “quite free (of contraction),” or “relatively free (of contraction).”²⁸ On the other hand, he sometimes uses “*absolutius*” where what is called for is “*absolutissimum*.”²⁹

3. Aside from Nicholas's fluctuating terminology, there are certain statements in his works that give rise to no end of misunderstanding. Two such statements are “God is the being of things”³⁰ and “God . . . is the Essence or Quiddity of things.”³¹ Interpreters have fastened upon these utterances, being persuaded that in their contexts they teach that (1) things have no essence other than God, (2) things have no positive being of their own, (3) things differ from one another only accidentally. For example, one such context is the illustration of an infinite line: “Now, an infinite line is the essence of a finite line. Hence, there is one essence of both lines [viz., a line of two feet and a line of three feet]; and the difference between the things, or the lines, does not result from a difference of the essence, which is one, but from an accident, because the lines do not participate equally in the essence. Hence, there is only one essence of all lines, and it is participated in in different ways.”³² A different aspect of the broader context is provided by the following sentence: “No thing exists in itself except the

Maximum; and everything exists in itself insofar as it exists in its Essence [*ratio*], because its Essence (*ratio*) is the Maximum."³³

Now, given such contextual considerations, it is easy to see why interpreters have construed "God . . . is the Essence of things" in the way many of them have. Yet, all things considered, their interpretation is oversimplified. Let us review the reasons why. First of all, Nicholas's statement that God is the Essence of things (or the Being of things) is an abbreviation for "God is the Essence of all essences" (or "God is the Being of all beings").³⁴ Nicholas teaches, as we have seen, that the contracted quiddity of the sun is other than the contracted quiddity of the moon, etc.³⁵ Just as he ascribes to things their own quiddities, or essences, so he also ascribes to them their own forms.³⁶ Insofar, then, as they have their own essences and forms, they have some positive being of their own. Moreover, insofar as they are substances, it is not true that they differ from one another only accidentally.³⁷ Secondly, the illustration of the infinite line is meant to have restricted application. Just as there is (hypothetically, not actually) only one infinite line, which is the essence of all lines, so there is only one Infinite Essence, which is the Essence of all essences. And just as no two finite lines are exactly equal, so no two finite substances are exactly alike. However, we are not supposed to conclude that just as two lines have the same essence (*viz.*, the infinite line) and therefore differ only accidentally, so two different substances have the same essence (*viz.*, God) and therefore differ only accidentally. Indeed, Nicholas considers finite substances to have their respective finite essences,³⁸ whereas finite lines do not have finite essences.³⁹

Accordingly, one substance differs from another substance in a way other than one line differs from another line. Yet—and this is Nicholas's point—even as finite lines participate in the infinite line, so finite beings (substances and accidents) participate in Maximum Being,⁴⁰ which is Infinite Essence. *Because* things participate in Infinite

Essence, they have their own respective essences, just as *because* they participate in Maximum Being they have their own respective being. Indeed, apart from this participation, they would be nothing. Ultimately speaking, then, only Maximum Being, or Maximum Essence, exists—because all else is ultimately dependent upon it for its origin and its continued existence. In other words, only Maximum Essence exists in itself. However, each finite thing can be said to exist in itself insofar as it exists in Maximum Essence,⁴¹ because in Maximum Essence it *is* Maximum Essence and not its finite self.⁴² We have seen that God is the Essence of all contracted essences in the sense that a given substance would not be what *it* is if God were not what *He* is; for whatever the substance positively is it owes to God, though God owes nothing to it. Similarly, God is the Being of all beings in the sense that a given being would not exist if God did not exist, though God's existence does not at all depend upon the existence of finite beings.⁴³ Accordingly, just as the fact that God is the Cause of all things does not preclude the fact that there are also secondary causes, so the fact that He is the Essence of all things does not preclude the fact that there are secondary essences.

God created all things *ex nihilo*.⁴⁴ However, this creation did not take place in time. Rather, the basic components of the universe were created instantaneously, and time began with their creation.⁴⁵ Hence, God precedes the world not chronologically but ontologically. The creation may be said to have *emanated* from God, provided emanation be understood as not interfering with the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and provided the basic elements of the universe not be understood as having been created in temporal stages. Thus, (1) all things (*i.e.*, all essences and forms) are present eternally and incorruptibly in God as the most simple and incomposite Word of God Himself, who may be called Divine Exemplar and World-soul;⁴⁶ and (2) all things exist in the temporal order, wherein some of them are subject to corruption, *i.e.*, destruction.⁴⁷

In the case of God, then, unfolding is creating;⁴⁸ and creating is a kind of causing. God is present in all created things as a cause is present in that which it is causing.⁴⁹ He is present in each thing absolutely, in the sense that He is not at all affected by modifications in that thing—even as an original is unaffected by modifications in its images. Yet, God is not present in each thing as He is in Himself—any more than the original as it is in itself is present in the image. Moreover, the image qua image has its own form;⁵⁰ yet, it receives the formal likeness of the original and could not exist without the original. Similarly, a given substance qua that substance has its own form; yet, it contracts a symbolic likeness of the Form of forms, viz., God, apart from whom it could not exist.⁵¹ God is called *Form of forms* because He forms (i.e., creates) the form of each finite thing.⁵² But He is not Form in any sense in which we can understand the signification of “form,” since we cannot understand His creating.⁵³

4. Another central passage which has occasioned misunderstanding is *De Coniecturis* I, 8 (35:14-27):

When in this way the perceptible is elevated by us to reason or to intellect or to the first, most absolute Oneness, discourse about it must be in accordance with the rules of that respective region. For example, when we free the oneness of a stone from all perceptible, rational, or intellectual plurality and reduce it to Infinite Simplicity, there is no longer anything that can be affirmed of it. For then it is not the case that it is a stone rather than not-a-stone; instead, it is all things. The case is similar with regard to other perceptible objects. And you will readily understand this if you recognize that the Absolute Oneness of a stone is not the Absolute Oneness of a stone more than of not-a-stone and that there is one Absolute Oneness of all things—viz., God. Hence, just as God is the Absolute Oneness of this perceptible and nameable stone, so intellect is the intellectual oneness of this stone.⁵⁴

This passage has sometimes been taken to indicate that from one point of view a stone is a stone but that from another point of view a stone is God—that God is the inner nucleus of each finite thing, that finite things do not differ

from one another essentially, and so on. But these con-
struals miss Nicholas’s point, which is analogous to his point in *De Possess* 68:11-23:⁵⁵ Through the strategy of mentally removing the determining and other-making properties of some finite object such as the sun (or a stone), we come to see undifferentiated Being itself (or Absolute Oneness), of which no property is either affirmed or denied; at this point what we are intuiting is no longer a finite object but God, who enfolds all things.

In the passage from *De Coniecturis* the expression “Absolute Oneness of a stone” is a *modus loquendi*, since, as Nicholas says, “the Absolute Oneness of a stone is not the Absolute Oneness of a stone more than of not-a-stone” It is called “the Absolute Oneness of a stone” because it is arrived at by beginning with the image or the thought of a stone—just as it would be called “the Absolute Oneness of the sun” had we started with the sun. The stone’s oneness is not absolute, but is a contracted sensible oneness; and Absolute Oneness is not a stone’s oneness, because at this level there is no longer anything which could rightly be thought of as a stone. Nicholas does say: “. . . God is the Absolute Oneness of this perceptible and nameable stone” But what he means thereby is that God is the Absolute Oneness of all things—of stone and of not-stone—because all things, as enfolded in Him, are His Oneness. Just as God is “the Being of all things in such way that He is not any of these things,”⁵⁶ so He is the Oneness of all things in such way that He is not any thing’s contracted oneness (and a thing has no absolute oneness).

5. Like the medieval conception of the world, Nicholas’s conception is hierarchical. This fact is displayed clearly in *DI* II, 6 and III, 1. The ordering of reality begins with God, who is Absolute Oneness, enfolding all things absolutely (i.e., not as their contracted, finite selves).⁵⁷ Next comes the universe, which is the most universal contracted oneness, and between which and Absolute Oneness, there is an infinite distance.⁵⁸ The universe is contracted in genera; genera

are further contracted in species, which are still further contracted in particulars. Only particulars exist actually; species, in turn, exist only in particulars, and genera are found only in species. No particular can attain to the limit of its species;⁵⁹ no species can attain to the limit of its genus; no genus can attain to the limit of the universe; and the universe falls infinitely short of the "limit," so to speak, of Absolute Maximality.

This, then, is the hierarchical picture which is intrinsic to Nicholas of Cusa's metaphysic of contraction. This metaphysical system—taken as a whole and including its accompanying Christology—is highly original in the history of Western thought. Yet, the originality becomes obscured by a series of interpretations that issue forth from two different directions. On the one hand, Nicholas is viewed as someone whose ideas are hopelessly vague, whose terminology is intolerably incoherent, whose metaphysical system is a mere eclecticism. On the other hand, he is viewed as someone whose metaphysic of contraction lies at the basis of the metaphysics of modernity—someone who by his new conceptions and new terminology paves the way for German Idealism. The former view underestimates Nicholas's originality, passing it off as confusion. The latter, by contrast, overestimates it, eulogizing it as indicative of a fundamental rupture with the Middle Ages. In both instances the true import of the Cusan philosophy is lost sight of.

The foundations of Nicholas's philosophy lie deep in the medieval world, with its encapsulated heritage from antiquity. The universe is said to consist of substances and accidents, genera and species, formal and material principles. Moreover, each thing's form, as it exists in God, is eternal. Thus, the Word of God—the second member of the Trinity—is the Exemplar of all things. (In this respect God is considered to be all things, while in another respect He is none of all things.) Nicholas's thought is, indeed, *eclectic*, for it borrows from Anaxagoras, Plato, Aristotle, Pseudo-

Dionysius, Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, Erigena, Aquinas, Albert Magnus, Meister Eckhart, Raymond Lull, Heimeric de Campo, and a host of others. Yet, it is not an *eclecticism*, for the themes that are borrowed are worked into a system which strikingly surpasses anything resembling a mere composite. Nicholas's thought pulsates in the direction of modernity, without, however, tuning out the past. His penchant for dialectic—as witnessable most vividly in *De Visione Dei*—would alone entitle him to be called the first modern philosopher. But there are many other signs of modernity as well. For example, his fondness for paradoxical expression—a predilection stimulated by the reading of Pseudo-Dionysius—likewise points toward the modern period. Above all, his innovative cosmology and his use of mathematics to illustrate metaphysical theses—especially his use of the notion of infinity—place him partly outside the medieval world. But though he is the first modern philosopher,⁶⁰ he is not the Father of modern philosophy, a title rightly reserved for Descartes; for he does not break with the past, as does Descartes. Yet, he is the first to propose ideas whose implications, had they been further developed by his contemporaries or his successors, would have required a conceptual break with the past.

If Nicholas's originality resides primarily in his metaphysics, then extensive misapprehension of his metaphysical system will engender a concomitant misappraisal of his modernity. In the foregoing chapters we examined some noteworthy instances of such a double failure. In our examination we proceeded on the basis of the consideration that Nicholas sets forth a single metaphysical system, though with two different levels—the ultimate and the nonultimate. To be sure, this system is not fully unified. Yet, its *lack of total unity* must not be mistaken for a *total lack of unity*. Indeed, Nicholas's metaphysical thinking never fully veers from its initial expression in *DI*. That someone as philosophically ingenious as Nicholas should have changed his mind at various points along the way cannot