The Nature of the Individual in the Thought of Nicholas of Cusa

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THE NATURE OF THE INDIVIDUAL
IN THE THOUGHT OF NICHOLAS OF CUSA

by

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Submitted to the
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in partial fulfillment
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CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND FOR NICHOLAS' THOUGHT

During the first sixty-four years of the fifteenth century an energetic churchman, Nicholas of Cusa, pursued an active career as a diplomat, administrator and reformer. However, in spite of the demands of church affairs, which included some highly controversial reform attempts, Nicholas produced a large body of writings dealing with science, mathematics and philosophy. Well-educated in these fields, he in turn made original and occasionally influential contributions to each of these disciplines. His work in all three areas, as well as in his career, stemmed from and in turn reinforced his basic belief that all knowledge and existence were interdependent and ultimately reconciled in an absolute and simple whole. It was on this concept that Nicholas established his metaphysical system by which he hoped to demonstrate the truths of the Christian revelation.

Although the central theme of Cusanus thought is unity, this paper will seek to determine the role of individuality within the absolute whole. It will examine Nicholas' attitude toward individual existence and human thought. Does he recognize a positive place for individuality within his system which emphasizes the reality of the whole? Nicholas' views of the relationship of the individual to his society and to his environment are not only of interest to the historian of thought, but remain relevant to those involved with such concerns today.

Nicholas developed an original synthesis which is not
easily classified by period or school. Some scholars claim that he is the "first modern thinker" while others insist that he is the last of the great medieval minds, incorporating many earlier trends of thought. However, Nicholas' system, although it was traditional in its desire to combine in a rational way the elements of faith and reason, does not fit any label but remains strikingly his own. He did not, of course, write in a vacuum, and it is possible to observe many of the influences from which he shaped his ideas. A recognition of these elements gives some indication of the point of departure of his thought as well as of his originality. He represents neither a rehash of earlier ideas nor a radical break with the past.

Of particular influence in Nicholas' thought was Neoplatonism and its Christian interpretation. This philosophy generally held that reality was One; that is, that the finite emenates and returns to transcendent simply unity. Although totally separate, infinite and finite are inextricably involved. True reality or being is in the One, which is spiritual. The nearer or more similar something is to the One, the more it has being or reality.

Some of the Neoplatonist mystics, such as pseudo-Dionysius, fifth-century writer, and John Scotus Eriugina (C.810-C.875), emphasized in their writings the unfathomable quality of this One who was unlimited and therefore unnamable. They advocated a negative theology which held that the most accurate knowledge of God came from a process by which all the names of God were eliminated during meditation, enabling the soul to apprehend in a transcendental way
the Nothing which is, of course, Everything. This was possible because the soul was the image of the One. These were central ideas in Neoplatonist thought and they all appear in Cusanus' work, although in altered form.

In addition to the general influence of Neoplatonism, Nicholas occasionally used specific ideas from earlier writers. For example, Nicholas, who was a fervent lecturer and annotator of Proclus' *Parmenides*, develops in his own work a concept of the Absolute which corresponds to the "exalted unity" of that work.¹ And he would have found in his study of Eckhart his idea of a coincidentia-oppositorum.² In his book *Nicholas of Cusa*, Henry Bett analyses the influence of both Eriugena and Augustine on specific aspects of Cusanus' thinking, particularly concerning the Trinity.³ Thus, there can be recognized in Nicholas' system a strong link to Neoplatonist and Christian Neoplatonist thought.

Nicholas drew on other writers who proceeded him. One of these was St. Anselm who defined God in his *Prosologion*: "We believe that Thou art a being than which none greater can be conceived." (aliquid, quo nihil magius colgitar possit).⁴

³Ibid., p. 102.
Nicholas' conception of the Maximum is so similar that it is thought by some writers to have been derived from Anselm.\(^1\) Cusanus also seems to adopt Anselm's argument that a highest truth must exist.\(^2\) Echoing Anselm he writes:

> All that we can say or think is exhausted by the following propositions which are the maximum truth on the absolute maximum itself: it is or it is not; it is and it is not; it neither is nor it is not. My point is made no matter which of these you affirm as truth at its maximum, for in the simple maximum I have the maximum truth. (De d. ig., I, vi).

Another philosopher whom Nicholas avidly studied was Raymond Lull (1235-1315).\(^3\) During the year 1427-1428, while at Cologne, he copied and analyzed Lull's work. There are thirty-nine of Lull's writings at Nicholas' library at Kues, more than those of any other author. It is also generally accepted that Nicholas was familiar with William of Occam and the Averroists, both because of the philosophical bent of some of the schools he attended and because a certain nominalism seems to be incorporated into his ideas.\(^4\) Even from these few examples it can be seen that

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1. For examples see Bett, *op. cit.*, p. 125, and D.J.B. Hawkins (ed.), *Of Learned Ignorance*, p. xviii.
2. Anselm, *op. cit.*, chapters I and II.
3. According to J. N. Hilgarth's *Raymond Lull and Lullism in Fourteenth Century France* (Oxford, 1971) Lull was an unusual and interesting scholar. In the Neo-platonist mold, he was dedicated to bringing Islam into Christianity through the discovery of common truths. He was fascinated by algebra and used mathematical and alphabetical symbols to illustrate his ideas. His mysticism, religious tolerance and interest in the names of God remind one of Cusanus.
Nicholas was familiar with and had carefully examined the writings of other philosophers and that they helped to form some of the fundamentals of his thought.

Another important intellectual influence on Nicholas was his training and experimentation in mathematics and science. He studied under Paolo Toscanelli (1397-1482) who was an outstanding mathematician, interested in theoretical mathematics. Nicholas' ability in this field is commented on by E. Cassirer:

As a mathematician, Cusanus immediately gathered about him a wide circle of students, including Purebach and Regionentus, as well as a large number of Italian mathematicians. At that time Italy possessed no truly leading mind in the field of mathematics, no thinkers comparable to Cusanus in the originality and profundity he showed in setting up the problem. According to M. Cantor in his work on the mathematicians of the fifteenth century, "there was only one highly gifted mind with the stamp of inventor: Cusanus".1

Nicholas was equally interested in scientific study, particularly weights and measures, and astronomy. His involvement in these areas has to be considered as a major element in his thinking for they clearly shaped his approach to philosophical problems and probably enabled him to enrich earlier ideas with new insights.

Other influences on Nicholas such as schools, family background, humanism and the conciliar movement will be discussed in a later biographical sketch. To some extent each of these may have helped to mold his thought, including his views on individuality.

In many cases Nicholas' ideas appear to correspond with the most recent thinking in physics and philosophy and it is possible to show examples of some of his speculations which were later proven to be scientifically and mathematically sound. Yet it should always be acknowledged that Nicholas was the product of a rich heritage and did not break from the past either by intent or result. His ultimate view of reality was not unlike many medieval works and can be found, for example, in the final canto of Dante's Paradisio. For Dante the journey to understanding involves the purgation of sin while for Nicholas it is the striving of the mind for learned ignorance, but for each the conclusions are the same: the center and the circumference of the universe are one; this one is God who is the unchanging, utterly simple form of forms, above mortal conception, and the source and object of desire.

Nicholas drew together ideas and observations from many sources. From them he fashioned a unique approach within a traditional framework. Although he stated that his system came to him in a moment of revelation, his ideas are not radically different from those of his predecessors. Nevertheless they are unique and thoughtful and remain of enduring interest. With these comments as a brief orientation to Cusanus' thought, we shall examine the fundamental premises of his system and their consequences for individuality.
CHAPTER II

THE IDEA OF NUMBER

In order to discover the place of the individual in Cusanus' thought it is necessary to understand his metaphysical system. This system is basically contained in one work, his De docta ignorantia. Although he wrote many other treatises, they are generally recapitulations of the ideas found in this initial presentation. The crucial ideas, if not the nomenclature, remain the same. Nicholas, a philosopher and mathematician, arrives at his system by drawing conclusions based on the idea of number. Number itself exists, he states, because "if number is denied, then the distinction, hierarchy, relationship, harmony and even plurality of beings must be denied" (De d. ig., I, v).\(^1\) It seems to me that the concept of number, by which Nicholas may interchangably mean either a mathematical unit or finite existence, is the key to his thought and ultimately to his ideas on individuality.

Just as Nicholas accepts the existence of number, he accepts the existence of reason for these two are interrelated. Reason is the individuating process which allows us to comprehend a thing by perceiving its distinctiveness. Number is necessarily

\(^1\)All references from De docta ignorantia are marked De d. ig. and indicate the book and chapter.
the tool of reason for we can only know a thing that is limited. The reason gives names only to things which are capable of being "more" or "less." Everything knowable must exist as a limited unit or number because it is by seeing agreement and distinction of things that we become able to measure, and therefore form some idea of both accidental and substantial existences (De d. ig., I, i). It is from thought that "all things receive limit and measure." Thus, reason can only operate because number exists and number is understood only because there is reason.

It is possible for the intellect, using the facts which reason has gathered from numbers, to draw analogies from which it can establish some limited truths about the nature of the Absolute (De d. ig., I, xi). (In a later chapter the specifics of Cusanus' epistemology will be examined.) Number yields the highest truths available to the human mind. Nicholas establishes his system entirely on the demonstrated mathematical analogies which he draws from number. He does not rely on Scripture or authority to prove his arguments. His references to Pythagoras, Dionysius and those church fathers who honored number as a divine tool for seeking the truth are used only as a sort of auxiliary support.

The first conclusion to be drawn from number is that knowledge is ignorance. Reason can only apprehend that which is a

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1 Cusanus, De mente, I.
number or finite unit because it knows only through a comparative method of inquiry. Something incapable of being "more" or "less" cannot be compared and, therefore, cannot be understood. The human mind cannot grasp something to which there is none other (non aliud) and, consequently, can never possess the absolute truth which is clearly incapable of being "more" or "less." We cannot measure the total truth which is one and indivisible just as "that which is not a circle cannot be the measure of a circle, for the nature of a circle is one and indivisible" (De d. ig., I, iii). We can measure only number, and thus all we can ultimately affirm is our own ignorance: in the face of the totality of knowledge we are like "owls trying to look at the sun." We who are not the total truth cannot know it. This conclusion, however, does not discourage Nicholas for he does believe that our ignorance can become more and more learned and that we can draw closer and closer to truth itself (De d. ig., I, iii). Because we desire truth, the intellect continues to draw analogies from number.

Number leads to the conclusion that the maximum truth, which is the necessarily existing absolute maximum of being, is the total of all that can be and that this totality must be both infinite and One. Number is finite and can always be added or subtracted, so no number is capable of being the totality of all because there could always be one more added. Therefore, unity at its absolute perfection cannot be a number or a plurality; it must be One (De d. ig., I, v). Numbers, however, do exist and they necessarily proceed from something. Their source must be
infinite because that which is finite must ultimately have an
infinite first cause. Numbers are relative to One which alone
is infinite. As numbers must come from One, the infinite maxi-
mum, so must all finite creatures come from a Unity which is an
infinite One. The totality cannot be a plurality nor can the
source be finite.

Thirdly, number also leads us to the conclusion that the
Absolute Maximum is the Absolute Minimum. Nicholas says:

By definition the minimum is that which cannot be
less than it is; and since this is also true of
the maximum, it is evident that the minimum is
identified with the maximum.

This becomes clearer when you restrict your con­
siderations to the maximum and minimum of quantity.
The maximum quantity is infinitely great, whilst
the minimum is infinitely small. Now if mentally
you lay aside the notions of greatness and small­
ness, you are left with the maximum and minimum
without quantity, and it becomes clear that the
maximum and the minimum are one and the same....
(De d. ig., I, iv)

In other words absolute quantity is both minimum and maximum be­
cause it is One. Unity is both the smallest possible unit and
the totality of all. Unity, or the totality of all as one, ne­
cessarily exists and cannot be more or less than it is or it is
not unity. As unity it is simple--one as simple minimum and
simple maximum.

Not everyone is impressed with Cusanus' argument here.

Henry Bett especially criticizes this idea:

It does not seem to have occurred to Nicholas in
advancing this naive argument, that it is precis­
ly quantity without which (according to his own
definition) the terms become simply meaningless.
It is like saying that black and red are really the same, because if you think away colour, the terms coincide....

The whole meaning of the term lies in the condition which he supposes—that the minimum is so small that it cannot be less, and if it were greater it would not be the least, and the maximum is so great that it cannot be more, and if it were less it would not be the greatest, and when once that essential is expressed the terms cannot be changed. When you express the character of the minimum by saying that it cannot be more, you cannot apply that phrase to the maximum.... The maximum and the minimum do not coincide and cannot be made to appear to do so when they are adequately defined.1

Although Nicholas may have violated the rules of definition here, I think he would have been undaunted by this criticism. He repeatedly stresses that we are unable to rationally reconcile contradictories. He is clearly aware of his problems with definitions in dealing in areas where the intellect must transcend the rational. At one point he says that "understanding of this matter will be attained rather by our arising above the literal sense of the words, than by insisting on their natural properties, for these properties cannot be effectively adapted to such intellectual mysteries" (De d. ig., I, ii). Later he applies this to his specific use of "maximum" and "minimum":

In this book the terms maximum and minimum are not restricted to quantity of mass or force; they have an absolutely transcendent value embracing all things in their absolute simplicity. (De d. ig., I, iv)

In answer to Bett, it must be said that Nicholas is forced into using logically weak definitions and words outside of their

1Bett, pp. 128-29.
finite frame of reference because, he would say, there is no logical or finite way to understand the Absolute. We are incapable of grasping the truth because we are not the truth. There can be no understandable connection between the infinite and the finite just as no progression of finite numbers can ever reach infinity. This is the central problem expressed by his use of the words "minimum" and "maximum"—how are we to explain the coincidence of two opposites? We accept that the absolute total of all is an absolute maximum which must be a One. One, however, is a minimum. At the same time we rationally reject the idea that the totality and source of all finite things can be infinitesimally small and utterly simple. Yet we know from the study of number that this must be, for we cannot deny the existence of number and thus cannot deny that it proceeds from something or that the totality of all number would be a unity. Number, finite and limited, must have a beginning and an end, and this must be one and infinite. The existence of the finite never alters the size of the One which remains a maximum-minimum. The term Absolute Maximum, which coincides with the Absolute Minimum, really expresses an undefinable mystery incapable of normal definitions.

Cusanus expresses the impossible intellectual leap to this mystery in many places. He states that we can comprehend the problem but can never know the answer. In a passage from De visione Dei he expresses this mystery:

Thou, my God, art Very Absolute Infinity, which I perceive to be an end without an end, but I am unable to grasp how without an end as end could
be an end. Thou, God, art the End of Thine own self, for Thou art whatever Thou hast; if Thou hast an end, Thou art an End. Thou art therefore an infinite End, because Thou art the End of Thine own self. Since Thine end is Thine essence, the essence of the end is not determined or ended in any place other than the end itself. The end then which is its own end is infinite, and every end which is not its own end is a finite end. Thou, Lord, who art the End ending all things art the End whereof there is no end, or infinite. This eludeth all reason, because it implieth a contradiction. Thus, when I assert the existence of an end without an end, I admit darkness to be light, ignorance to be knowledge, and the impossible to be a necessity. Since we admit the existence of an end of the finite, we needs must admit the infinite, or the ultimate end, or the end without an end. Now we cannot but admit the existence of finite beings. Wherefore we cannot but admit the infinite. Thus, we admit the coincidence of contraries, above which is the infinite.¹

Cusanus accepts the necessity of an unfathomable mystery at the peak of human intellectual effort. Number demonstrates this for it teaches that the finite must have a source and end which must be One and infinite. Further, number teaches that the nature of the infinite must be absolutely simple for if it were limited internally in any way it would necessarily have to proceed from a higher, unlimited source, as the limited always comes from the unlimited. Thus, all opposites are reconciled in the pure simplicity of One which holds within itself all without contradiction or division. By nature then the Absolute is a coincidentia-oppositorium, rationally necessary and rationally impossible.

Having thus established that the Maximum is unfathomable,

absolute simplicity and the maximum-minimum, Nicholas demonstrates through number that this pure nature is necessarily triune. Diversity and inequality exist and give limitation to all things. However, these necessarily are preceded by unity and equality. Unity, which is the simple one, is infinite. As unity necessarily can have an equal, Equality must also be infinite. As there is a connection between these which is not caused by either of them, the Connection must also be eternal. But three eternals cannot exist for plurality is preceded by unity (De d. ig., I, iv).

Therefore, the Absolute Unity, which is one, is three. This is beyond understanding although we know that contradictories are resolved in the ultimate Being which is incapable of "more" or "less." This conception of the Maximum is essential to Nicholas' explanation of the universe. Another important conclusion that can be seen equally fundamental to his thought is that Unity (One) is the only entity which can have an equal. All other things are limited and unequal for the idea of equality implies perfection and absoluteness, and these can only be attributes of the infinite. Everything else exists in limitation. Thus all finite things exist in degrees and are different from each other even when the difference appears indiscernible.

As we have seen, Nicholas uses number as the best way to reach the truths of which humans are capable. The concept of number includes the mathematical figures. Removed as they are from the senses, he feels that mathematical figures provide a "more certain and solid knowledge" of divine truths (De d. ig., I, xi). By establishing facts about these figures, he feels
that we can then apply analogies from them to the Absolute. Although the actual demonstrations he gives may seem somewhat superfluous as proofs for his conclusions, they demonstrate his method, his fascination with number, and his assumption that the intellect can achieve a higher plane of "knowing." Through drawings and explanations he seeks to show a fundamental point—that if there were an infinite line it would be at once a straight line, a triangle, a circle and a sphere (De d. ig., I, xiii). For example, he shows that if the angle of a triangle becomes greater and greater it will eventually be 180° and become a simple line. The same is true if the arc of the circle is increased. Therefore, both the triangle and the circle are in essence a simple line. However, the infinite line is also an infinite triangle for the three sides of an infinite triangle must be infinite. The three infinite lines must be one line because it is impossible to have an infinite plurality. This is a "transcendental conclusion" proving that the infinite triangle, as the perfect model triangle, must have three lines but they must be resolved without contradiction as one perfectly indivisible line (De d. ig., I, xiv). Thus the infinite line is an infinite triangle and the infinite triangle is an infinite line. Similar arguments are used to show that all the figures are in each other without confusion. Cusanus uses this model (De d. ig., I, xiii):
By moving line A-B to C we get a triangle and by continuing we get a circle. The diameter B-D forms the perfect figure of the sphere.

Whether these demonstrations are convincing or not, Nicholas gathers information from the finite mathematical figures and applies it first to the infinite forms of these figures and then to the Infinite. The qualities of the Infinite which he learns in this way furnish the basis for his arguments and conclusions. An example of the sort of truth he draws from the figures can be seen in the infinite circle. From the infinite circle we learn that the center and the circumference of the Maximum are one and the same. If the circle is infinite, its diameter is also infinite for any part of an infinite is infinite. Therefore, the center of the diameter is also infinite and as any part of an infinite is the same as any other part, the center, diameter and circumference of the infinite circle are one. The conclusion we learn is

that the Maximum, which is at once the Minimum, is incomprehensible; and in it the centre is the circumference.

You see how the minimum in its simplicity and indivisibility is wholly and completely in the midst of all, because it is the infinite centre; how while outside all it encompasses all, because it is the infinite circumference; how it penetrates all because it is the infinite diameter. (De D i g., I, xxii)

This conclusion later supports his reasoning that there is no center to the universe and that all heavenly bodies move and exist relative to each other. In the same way, Cusanus takes the infinite sphere, line and triangle to draw analogies about the nature of the Absolute.
Perhaps the most important conclusion to be drawn from the figures is that the essence of each is identical. All are in each other in a simple state. From this we learn that the essence of all finite things is the same and comes from the undifferentiated Maximum just as the essence of the finite line is from the infinite line which is the infinite circle, sphere and triangle. While each finite thing is distinct and unequal it receives its being from the one absolute essence which is the simple Maximum.

Number is the tool of reason and Nicholas has used it to draw his most basic conclusions about the nature of the Maximum which is the source of all individual things. Now it must be seen how Nicholas views the nature of individual things and the value that he gives to human existence and thought.
CHAPTER III

THE NATURE OF INDIVIDUAL EXISTENCE

Nicholas of Cusa accepted the existence of the plurality of finite things which are evident to us; this is the principle of number. But in what way do these individual things exist? Do they have actual existence or are they merely reflections or shadowy developments from a higher Being? It is important to understand the nature of the reality of individual existence for Cusanus to determine the implications for individuality in his thought. It is necessary to point out that Nicholas uses the term "actual existence" for two distinct ideas. He uses actualis to refer both to the Absolute and to the individual in act. These are not distinguished, although he clearly intends different concepts, as the existence of the Absolute is prior to and the source of the existence of individual things which are limited and contingent.

Cusanus states that logically we accept "the existence of finite things, wherefore we cannot but accept the infinite," but that we cannot know this Infinite because it is absolute Otherness.¹ Totally unlimited, it is the source and end of all because it is all. Nicholas speaks of the explicato-complicatio of God and, given this sort of Neoplatonist conception in which

¹De visione Dei, Dolan, p. 154.
the creation is an outpouring and returning motion from a One, we might expect of him an emanationist theory in which individual things have the least reality as they are the farthest removed from actual Being. And indeed many times Nicholas stresses that reality is in the Maximum in sentences like "The Maximum is the infinite actual existence of all that is..." (De d. ig., I, xvi). Further, he makes it clear that there can be no relationship between Reality and finite beings, just as we cannot explain any connection between numbers and their unalterable source. Yet, while each creature neither augments nor diminishes the Absolute, we know that each must be from and in it. But do they have a full reality?

Nicholas is not always clear in expressing in what way he feels that things relate to God's reality. At times he implies that there is no true reality outside of God but only images from Himself, the form of forms. Creatures exist by the creative movement of God's understanding and therefore:

A creature is not a positively distinct reality that receives the image of the infinite form, it is merely the image and nothing more, and in different creatures we see accidentally different images of that form. Since that is so, how is it possible for us to understand that the various creatures share in different ways the one infinite form? It is as if a work of art were to have no other being than that of dependence, and of total dependence on the idea of the artist, from whom it would receive its being and by whose power it
would be conserved in being, or it is like the
reflection of a face in the mirror, provided we
suppose that the mirror in and of itself is
nothing before or after the reflection.
(De d. ig., II, ii).

Thus, in one sense Cusanus is saying that the individual is not
"a positively distinct reality" but merely an image of actual
reality upon whom it is entirely dependent. All things exist as
different reflections of the ideas which exist in an undifferenti-
tated state in one infinite form. Individual things would thus
appear to have reality in only the most secondary way—as an
image created by the thought of God.

However, there can be no question that Cusanus accepts the
actual existence of the finite things of this world. In fact the
key to his metaphysical system is the fact that only finite things
actually exist outside of the One. His starting point may be
Neoplatonism but a sort of nominalism exerts itself and he ar-
dently rejects emanationist theories. Each thing is a part of
the explicato-complicatio of God but each is immediately from
God (De d. ig., II, v). I think that by taking this position
Nicholas logically can protect, honor and demonstrate the abso-
lute oneness of God and explain the direct infusion of the Word
into the universe. In doing this, however, the individual takes
on a new and important position. Thus, the nature of individual
existence is of the greatest significance in his system.

Fundamental to his conception of the nature of the individ-
ual existence is his rejection of any absolute outside of the
Undifferentiated Maximum. He discusses the theories of the Stoics
and Platonists that a Mind (or Soul of the World, or a Universal Necessity) existed as an initial unfolding of the mind of God and that within this Soul the forms of things had their true substantial existence "whereas in matter they are shadowy resemblances without their original clarity" (De d. ig., II, ix). The union of the Soul of the World to possibility, which was some sort of formless potential, actualized a sensitive, rational form. Possibility, says Cusanus, was for the Platonists the matter of forms (De d. ig., II, viii). He presents all of these theories in order to reject them. He shows that absolute possibility cannot exist outside of the Absolute for if it is absolute it is incapable of degrees and the only thing which cannot have degrees is the Maximum itself. There can be only one infinite existence. Therefore, the only unlimited possibility which can exist is absolute possibility which must necessarily reside in the Infinite. Absolute possibility cannot exist independently even as a divine emanation. In the same way, nothing can exist in act in the world which is unlimited. No being can exist which is not possible so all things are limited in act by what is possible. Matter needs form and form needs matter in order to be (De d. ig., II, viii). Act, therefore, receives a limitation from possibility if it is to exist outside of God. Unlimited act, which is infinite and absolute, can only be an attribute of the One. Absolute possibility and Absolute act reside in infinite unity in the Maximum (De d. ig., viii and ix).

Nicholas feels that, by mutual contraction, possibility and
act serve to limit each other and bring all things into existence.
The only unlimited existence, a maximum or a minimum, is One or
God. The order in the world is provided by this co-limiting:

...if the possibility of things were not limited,
there could be no rational explanation of anything,
but all would be due to chance as Epicurus wrongly
maintained. In fact, the possibility of this
world was contracted to the aptitude to be this
world, and that necessarily was the reason why
this world from being possible was brought into
actual existence. The aptitude of the possibility,
then, was limited and not absolute. (De d. ig.,
II, viii).

Thus, Cusanus maintains strongly that possibility and act
do not exist as absolutes apart from God. In the same way he
specifically rejects the existence of universals such as the genera
and species except as they pre-exist in the mind of God. He states
that they can have no actual existence save by contraction in the
singular as the singular. They are not in act and have no sub-
stance although "in the order of nature universals have a certain
universal being, which can be restricted by the individual..." (De d. ig., II, vi). Universals therefore, though logically
prior to individuals, have no actual reality. God is the entirely
absolute universal (Ibid.).

Thus only God and individual things have actual existence.
The universals are ideas in the mind of God and in human minds.
There is no series of descending emanations from Being down to
the lowliest farthest removed accidental reflection—a singular
thing. Instead Cusanus says that the universe was one simple
emanation of a restricted maximum from the absolute maximum.
Because all things must come from the Absolute Maximum and because there are no absolutes outside of the Absolute, then the universe, which is the maximum of all things, must be the equivalent of the Absolute Maximum reproduced in the greatest possible, although restricted, way (De d. ig., II, iv). The universe is a maximum but not the Maximum. It is all things held in unity and infinity but capable of plurality, composition, succession, finiteness, etc. Though the universe is one and maximal, it is relative because its identity will be in diversity (Ibid.). The unity and quiddity of the universe comes from but "is infinitely inferior to the pure unity of the Absolute" (De d. ig., II, iv).

As we have seen, Nicholas held that absolute Unity has a threefold nature and it is this which accounts for the unity of the universe. Possibility (or contractibility) proceeds from the eternal unity. A limiting principle comes from the equality of unity—or this could be called the "equality of being" for being and unity are convertible. The limiting principle and possibility are moved together by the eternal connection and together produce actually existing individual things. For Nicholas, of course, this creative unity is the Father, the Son (the Word or the "motive, essence, archetype of things" (De d. ig., II, vii)), and the Holy Spirit. Without these three, potency, act and nexus, the unity of the universe would be impossible. In order to exist the universe must be capable of contraction and contraction requires possibility (limited object), act (limiting principle) and a connection (actual determination) (De d. ig., II, vii).
Each individual thing is a direct contraction from unity and not from a series of universals. All things are in the All and each thing is necessarily contracted from the All, though the All is without plurality. Nicholas uses the example of the finite line to explain this idea. The cause or source of the finite line must be the infinite line and the infinite line contains within it all the figures. The figures are not actually present but are in the line as the line itself. Any segment of the infinite line is, of course, infinite so all is within it but without plurality. In the finite line which actually exists as an individual thing, the all of the infinite line exists as that line itself (De d. ig., II, vii). Each thing that exists in the universe comes from the One which is All and in itself the all is itself as the contraction of possibility, form and movement. Each comes from God through the intermediary of the universe (De d. ig., II, v), and, as each thing is a contracted all, then everything is in everything—quodlibet in quodlibet. Nicholas says:

The universe is in each individual in such a way that each individual is in it, with the result that in each individual is by contraction what that particular individual is; and every individual in the universe is the universe, though the universe is in each individual in a different way and each thing is in the universe in a different way. (De d. ig., II, v)

One of Nicholas' most basic premises is thus that the individual existence—human, vegetable, etc.—must have its source directly in the One without any intervening realities. The finite thing does not create itself, but in some unknowable way is
contracted from the One which reveals itself in the visible cre-
ation without altering its simple oneness. In order to achieve
existence the individual thing must be limited, but its limited-
ness is a limitation from the all without plurality, which is the
Absolute. Thus, the essence or quiddity of all things is identi-
cal (De d. ig., II, v), and all things are united for all is in
all and each is in each other. However, this essence in the in-
dividual is a restricted quiddity and each is a distinct restric-
tion:

No distinction can be made between the absolute
quiddity of the sun and the moon, for it is God
himself who is the absolute entity and quiddity
of all. But the restricted quiddity of the moon
is different from the restricted quiddity of the
sun, because the restricted quiddity of a thing
is the thing itself, whereas the absolute quiddity
is God and not the thing itself. (De d. ig., II, iv)

Thus, every existing thing is at once in its essence both God
and itself--and only itself. Thus, as Socrates participates in
humanity but is not humanity--or the eye and hand are in the body
but are not the body--so does each individual thing participate
in the whole, forming the whole without being the whole.

In addition to his belief that individual things are the
only reality apart from the reality of the One and that each
thing is a contraction of that reality, Nicholas stresses the
uniqueness of each thing as is suggested in the quotation above.
Everything exists by limitation and therefore everything is ca-
pable of degrees. Although things exist as "an approximate re-
production of the exemplar" none apart from the Examplar itself
can be an image that rules out "the possibility of an infinity of more faithful and precise images" (De d. ig., I, xi). Each thing has a singleness and a differentness which is its own and "no matter how equal the measure and the thing measured are, they will remain forever different" (De d. ig., I, iii). Uniqueness is maintained even within the genera and species where each represents "in its own weight, number and measure" and never absolutely coincides with another. All individuals are part of a continuum of the species which shade off into each other (De d. ig., III, i). Each member exhibits the nature of its own species to its own degree. Nicholas insists on this singularity:

In the universe there is nothing that does not enjoy a certain singularity that it shares with no other. Nothing can prevail over all that is in all things so as to turn their differences to sameness, for never can complete sameness exist in any two things. If at one time one thing is smaller and at another time larger than another, throughout the change it preserves its singularity so that never does it pass through a moment of exact equality. (De d. ig., III, i)

As the genera and species gradually coincide, they never reach a moment of equality between individuals. Existence is possible because of the limiting or individuating principles, and thus every degree is possible between the maximum and minimum of being but no finite thing can reach a maximum or minimum of a species because this would imply a perfection or equality of degrees which is impossible outside of the absolute (De d. ig., III, i and ii).

That individuals are immediate and unique creations from
God's essence is basic to Cusanus' other premise about the nature of individual existence: all things exist in a state of relativity. As we have seen, each individual thing is created through a relative and unique combination of potency, act and nexus. Moreover, each thing is also conditioned by every other existing thing. There are no absolutes in the universe. For example, absolute white or absolute heat can exist outside the Absolute only in degrees which will coincide in individual things with non-whiteness or cold. Because everything that exists outside of the One is limited, it must be in a structural as well as in an essential relationship. The precision of these relationships is as amazing to Cusanus as their existence is necessary. He discusses, for example, the relativity of the elements:

He allotted its parts that there should be no more
earth in the earth than water in the water, than air
in the air or fire in the fire, so that no element
could be wholly transmuted into another; whence it
comes that the physical system cannot sink into
chaos. Some of the elements may be transformed
into another, but (for example) the air which is
mingled with water can never all be changed into
water, the surrounding air preventing this; it is
this transmutability that makes possible the mingling
of the elements. Nevertheless, God has so arranged
it there should be transmutation of the elements;
and when this takes place successively there is
brought into existence a new thing which endures
in being as long as the agreement of the elements
remains. If the agreement is broken, the new
substance disappears. (De d. ig., II, xiii)

Nicholas sees that modes of existence disappear but this is no more than the resolution of a composite into its elements (De d. ig., II, xii). Thus, individuals, things and the elements which comprise them are in a continuous state of relativity.
Nor is there anything in the cosmos which is not relative. Something in the universe may appear to be the center or zenith but this is so only because of the relative position of the viewer (De d. ig., II, xi). There can be no material center of the universe for no absolute can exist outside of God and therefore no absolute point of rest is the center of the universe. All movements in the universe have degrees and influence every other movement. God describes the limits of the universe and in Him the center and circumference are one, for every part of an infinite is infinite and therefore the same. Thus everything in the universe exists only in relativity (De d. ig., II, xi). The stars act and react upon each other and this is equally true of all movements on earth. The earth itself is not the center of the universe but a star "having a light, heat, influence distinctively its own" and as a consequence of realizing its own existence, it communicates to other stars in the same way that light gives light by its nature, but as a consequence of being itself, it enables seeing (De d. ig., II, xii).

These then are the basic ideas which Nicholas had about the nature of the existence of individual things. Each shares the absolute essence of the One but each as a unique contraction of possibility and act. Each is designed to fulfill its own existence and as it does so, it is acted upon and acts upon every other thing so that all together participate in the structure of the whole. All things are conditioned if they are to have existence, and it is this limitation which causes both their individuality and their relativity.
Thus, we see that Nicholas viewed the nature of individual existence as being directly from God, utterly unique and completely relative. This attitude was the logical corollary to his conception of the Infinite One, the necessarily existing maximum Truth and Being, as the absolute totality and the absolute cause of all that is. In analyzing the implications of Nicholas' thoughts on individuality it seems that perhaps the most significant idea is the inextricable mix of individuality and relativity. Because there are no absolutes, everything is relative and reality can only exist in the individual things that are in act. Relativity itself, however, is maintained by the structure and functioning of the individual existences. This duality gives to Nicholas' individual both an importance and a humility. First of all there is something remarkable in seeing each thing in the universe as a unique contraction of the essence of God. A human individual can exult in his uniqueness and significance, yet this view is mitigated by the knowledge that every other thing is equally unique and significant. A sort of equality of inequality arises for although everything exists in degrees each is an individual and as essentially divine as any other. Secondly, while individuals are the expression of reality, this state exists because of the interaction of all the forms of existence. Individuality seems somewhat tenuous and dependent; its reality is finite and relative, a notch in a continuum of being. Lastly, individuals take on great value in Nicholas' system because universals and hierarchies are not actual realities. There is nothing
between God and a finite existence that is more real or valuable. The individual is not at the bottom of a series of emanations.

Moreover, in Nicholas' view of the centerless universe in which the earth moves and interacts with all the other stars, the individual is no longer at the bottom of a heavenly hierarchy. In this way, Nicholas establishes that individuals are not only essentially and functionally significant, they are the highest expression of reality and the relative center of the universe. No matter what universals will be framed in the mind or what inequalities will be found to exist among humans, at least no individual is inherently less significant than any other person, idea or thing on a scale of being or within the universe. Once again, while Nicholas grants to the individual this status, it is conditioned by the fact that while there is no inferiority there is also no superiority. Individuality in Nicholas' system is a positive value, an expression of the being of God, but it only exists in a relative state and it is shared equally in the sense of essence and involvement with the whole by every other finite existence. Thus his system implies the inherent equality of all individuals and their primary place in reality.

It should be noted that Nicholas' metaphysical view of individual reality and relativity have been considered some of his most innovative conceptions. For example, from an historical perspective Nicholas is seen to have brought about "the radical divorce of individual and essence."¹ This is because his doctrine of the unity of essence implies that things exist by their

¹Thomas McTighe, "Nicholas of Cusa and Leibniz's Principle of Indiscernibility," Modern Schoolman, XLII (November 1964), 44.
differences. In addition, some scholars feel that he was the first thinker to express the "structuralist" view of the universe when he emphasized the function of the Trinity rather than its substance. The resulting tendency is to see reality in terms of transcendental structures (functions and relations) instead of substance. It is with Cusanus, says Jasper Blystone in his article "Is Cusanus the Father of Structuralism?" (Philosophy Today, 1972), that the idea that "no moment can be conceived autonomously" first appeared in history.\(^1\) Nicholas' ideas on relativity are considered by various scholars to have anticipated or influenced developments in philosophy, physics, calculus and astronomy.\(^2\)

Nicholas, whatever his influence, insists on the reality and relativity of individual existence. It remains to be seen if human existence is significant or superior in any way.

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\(^1\) Jasper Blystone, "Is Cusanus the Father of Structuralism?" Philosophy Today, 16 (1972), 303.

For Cusanus, each individual thing in the universe is a unique contraction of the absolute essence, existing in a relationship with every other fact of the universe. Therefore, in its essence no thing is superior to any other. As Cusanus stresses this "admirable equality and wonderful unity of things" (De d. ig., II, v), it must be asked if he finds human existence more significant than that of a radish, a bird or a star. In order to show that Nicholas thought that humanity is the highest form of existence, it would have to be demonstrated that he accepted a hierarchy of being. Even then, if human individuality is to be of any positive value, individuals would have to be able to think and operate with some degree of initiative and independence. It is indeed Nicholas' conception that humanity is the highest form of finite being as a result of its capability for thought, and that its thought is of an active and positive nature.

In his metaphysic Nicholas establishes that humans are the highest form of being outside of the Absolute through the following arguments. We have already seen that he denies the existence of reality to any intermediaries between the Maximum and the being of individuals. In the visible creation, however, he assumes a scale of being. Although he stresses that each thing is perfect in its own existence, striving to fulfill its own nature, and
contributing harmoniously to the whole (De d. ig., II, v), this basic (essential) equality is necessarily manifested in degrees of being because nothing can exist which is not capable of being "more" or "less." Equality and absoluteness are possible only for the One. The way in which the degree of being that a thing possesses is measured is through comparing it with the Maximum because the Maximum is total Being. Thus, the more similar a thing is to the Maximum, the more it participates in actual existence or reality. Cusanus illustrates this through number. The measure of the curve is the straight line because the maximum and minimum curve is a straight line. The measure of the straight line is the infinite line, so the curve's relationship to the infinite line is measured by its similarity to the finite line. It thus has a secondary relationship because "the finite line by reason of its straightness, enjoys a more direct and immediate participation in the infinite, whereas the curve's participation is rather remote and mediate" (De d. ig., I, xiii). Through this example Cusanus illustrates that substances reflect grades of accidents and degrees of participation.

Applying this to existing things, Nicholas says that beings exist by degrees and these degrees reflect the grade of their participation in the Infinite, who as the Unity and Reality of all is the Measure of all. Thus, the more immediately a creature is like God the more it partakes of being and the higher its nature. For Cusanus the nature of God is Thought which means that the measurement of the degree of being is the degree of thought.
God is the totality of all possible thoughts and is the source of all images which reflect his nature in varying ways:

Thus the creatures devoid of thought are less images than developments of the divine simplicity, although according to the brightness of the thought which shows in their development itself and which is the image itself, they participate in varied manner in that image.

Thus it is that every form called to identity is a partaker of Wisdom in so far as it can. Some of the participants hardly receive more than an elementary being, others more nobly fashioned are vegetable life, still higher sensible life, the scale then leads to imaginative power, then a rational, and finally an intellectual life. This latter is the highest level and it is nearest the image of wisdom.

Humans are the only creatures with intellectual life and are, therefore, the most noble of the species. Individual things in Cusanus' thought are not the last development on a descending scale of reality in which they are separated from the One by innumerable intervening universals and accidents. Each is immediately

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1De mente, IV.

2De sapientia, Dolan, p. 155.
from the One and is actually real. However, within the visible
creation things reflect the image of God in varying degrees and
the most like God, the most real, are those with intellect.

Humans, as the creatures with intellect, have the highest
place in the hierarchy of being. However, it needs to be seen
if the operation of this intellect is of any value or merely the
movement of pre-impregnated images. How then did Nicholas view
the finite mind and its operation? First of all, he teaches that
if all things are contractions from God then our minds are con-
ttracted forms of God's mind and thus latently contain all possible
ideas:

You know how the divine simplicity envelops all
reality. Thought is the image of this envelop-
ing simplicity. If one calls this infinite sim-
plcity an infinite thought one considers it as the
very model of our thought. And if one affirms that
the divine thought is the total truth of things,
one says of our thought that it is the total
assimilation of things since it contains the to-
tality of notions. For the infinite thought to
conceive things, it is the same as to produce
them. For us, it is to have of them only the no-
tion. If the infinite thought is absolute, it is
sufficient for it to conceive beings in order to
create them, while if our thought conceives them
it is contente to assimilate them.

All things are in God, but as models. All
things are in our thought, but as images. As
God is absolute being, enveloping all being,
thus our thought is the image of that infinite
being.¹

The human mind is a contraction of the infinite mind and,
therefore, of all possible ideas. Nicholas also thinks that as

¹De mente, III.
a contraction of the Mind the finite mind will have the power to function in an active and creative way. The mind of God includes at once intelligible being, intelligible object and the act of understanding (De d. ig., I, x). The human mind, therefore, has self-awareness, comprehensible concepts and the ability to move itself to achieve understanding. This is a crucial concept for Cusanus who stresses that the image of God (Wisdom) in man is "the living intellectual life whose power consists in being able by itself to exercise a motion whereby it advances by understanding to its proper object, absolute truth or eternal wisdom." It would seem that there are two causes of this ability of the mind to operate itself. Because it is modeled on God's mind, it is a functioning process, although assimilative rather than creative. Secondly, as one of God's works it moves to fulfill the existence given to its particular nature. Nicholas says that all things receive the abilities needed to be themselves, and these are all they desire to be (De d. ig., I, i). Because knowledge is the life or existence of the intellect, it receives a natural movement which ceaselessly desires truth (De d. ig., I, i).

Thus we see that as a contraction of infinite thought the mind contains all possible notions and the ability to think or understand. The notions which it contains are not apparent to the mind unless it chooses to move toward understanding:

1 De sapientia, Dolan, p. 156. (my italics)
Only that which is already in the intellect and by contraction in the intellect can be understood. By the act of understanding, therefore, it develops by means of similar characteristics and properties a world of resemblances which exists in it by contraction. (De d. ig., II, vi)

The mind must actively observe and analyze the natural world in order to form or comprehend that which is inherent in the understanding. Nothing can be conceived which is not in the mind of God and thus contracted into the human mind, yet no fact or image is available without effort on the part of the mind. Thus, Nicholas thinks that human minds are neither blank slates upon which information is absorbed, nor is it a form of memory, but, rather, they are microcosms of the mind of God which are capable of acting to achieve comprehension of the self, the world, and the One.

The actual operation of the mind is seen by Cusanus as a three-fold process. The mens is comprised of the senses, the reason and the intellect which have separate names and powers but are also a unity as they each co-penetrate the others.\(^1\) The senses are basic to the operation of the mens for without them no images could be formed (De d. ig., I, xi). Although their information is the least reliable because it is about fluctuating things, without the medium of the senses which transmit stimuli there would be nothing in reason (Nihil in ratione, quod pruis non fuerut in sensu).\(^2\) The need for sensory information is the

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\(^1\)De mente, XI, and De coniecturis, II, xiv.

\(^2\)De mente, II.
reason that we have bodies. The reason works through its creature, number, by classifying and naming things. Cusanus holds that thought is measure and says in *Idiota* that the word *mens* is related etymologically to *metari* because it is the nature of thought (reason) to impose limits and give names in order to comprehend the natural world.¹ Later in the same work he says that "the role of numbers is to discern the common realities, at first confounded, to synthetically reassemble the nature of things."²

As the senses furnish information to the reason, so does the reason serve the third element of the *mens*, the intellect. It is the intellect which distinguishes man from all other creatures and makes him capable of reaching a higher level of truth within the limits of his finite potential. The intellect, however, needs the reason to gather the facts from which it can form higher truths:

Consider therefore reason itself not as a root bedded in the body, but as the mid-point, through which the root of the intellect descends into the body, for it is the instrument of the intellect and, moreover the foundation or instrumental root of corporeal knowledge.³

The intellect descends into the reason but it then proceeds to work at levels higher than the distinguishing and comparing

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¹Ibid., I.
²Ibid., X.
³De coniecturis, I, vii.
faculties of reason can go. Reason allows understanding of the material world by individualizing things based on sensory information. The intellect, however, wishes for truths that are not dependent on the material world which is ever changing. Nicholas says, "the more we abstract from sensible conditions the more certain and solid our knowledge is" (De d. ig., I, xi). The intellect takes the information from reason and moves beyond it. This makes it possible for the intellect to accept what reason denies. For example, the reason cannot accept the coincidence of a line and a triangle, but it is easy for the intellect to do so (De d. ig., I, xiv). The intellect sort of recombines the distinctions made by the reason. The intellect can accept that there is at some point a coincidence of opposites, which appears absurd to reason. In fact the intellect abstracts the "immutable quiddities" of things, including its own immutability, and comprehends through its own efforts that all is ultimately one and simple. The intellect can enfold as One (complicativa) all things which exist in their unfolding (explicatione) as incompatible opposites because its own nature is the simple unity.

The aspect of the intellect which allows the mind to reconcile opposites and reach a high level of thought is often referred to by Nicholas as the intuition. Intuition is possible

1Ibid., and De mente, III.
2De coniecturis, II, ii.
because it is both independent and dependent. In its action it

turns itself and yet this would not be possible if it were not
made in God's image. It is intuition which manifests the highest
thought:

Universal intuition surpasses all relatively
determined necessity, since it is applied to
the truth stripped of all variation, in abso-
lute necessity, of absolutely simple form,
without number, without size, without any
sort of alteration. Now, if thought uses
itself for this superior mode of intuition,
it is because it is the image of God and as
God, who is all, it manifests in itself, at
the moment when it turns toward its model
as such, that living image of God, in an
effort of all its being in order to be
assimilated to Him.¹

We see here that Nicholas feels that thought uses its superior
mode when it wishes to turn itself to the truth and that this is
possible because it is modeled on the infinite.

The intellect is aware that it has this relationship with
the One and that through intuition it "contemplates not only all
as being one but itself as being the actively assimilated image
of that one." (Et hoc modo intuitur omnia unum et se illius
assimilationem, per quam notiones facet de uno, quod omnia).² In
addition, the intellect is aware of its own limitations, including
the limits of the sensory and the rational. It knows that it can
never achieve the full truth for it is not the truth and because

¹De mente, VII.

²De coniecturis, I, vii.
there is no progression from the finite to the infinite. While conscious of its own power of assimilation and active thought, it knows that all the conclusions it reaches can only be relatively true. In spite of the limits of the intellect, Cusanus does not emphasize this negative idea but praises the admirable power of our thought.\(^1\) The intellect is the glory of man because it is immutable, above time, and "unsubjected to temporal conditions, for by its nature it embraces within itself the incorruptible forms" (De d. ig., III, x). Nicholas believes that, while our knowledge can only be ignorance, it can always be "more true" and then, as we grope in the dark, "our ignorance will enlighten us in an incomprehensible fashion and enable us to form a more correct and truer notion of the Absolute (De d. ig., I, xii)."

How does the mind approach the problem of achieving learned ignorance which brings it closer to truth? Nicholas describes a three-fold process which requires the efforts of the senses, reason and intellect. The truth is found by drawing analogies from number:

In mathematics we are always dealing with finite things, for if they were not finite we could form no idea of them at all. If then we want to reach the Absolute Infinite through the finite, we must in the first place study finite mathematical figures as they are, namely a mixture of potency and act; then we must attribute the respective perfections to the infinite figures, and thirdly we must, in a much more sublime way, attribute the perfections

\(^1\)De mente, IV.
of the infinite figures to the simple infinite, which cannot possibly be expressed by any figure. (De d. ig., I, xii)

The senses and reason distinguish the figures; the intellect gives them their higher meaning and recognizes that it cannot express their ultimate simplicity. The mind goes to this effort because it desires truth and because it is contracted truth. By acting with itself as instrument, the mind uncovers what was inherent in it.

It should perhaps be re-emphasized that for Nicholas the mind, operating at the level of intellect, is what makes humanness, and as the intellect is the image of God, human thought is the soul. The soul and intellect are "one in the sense that in the animal the sensitive power of the eye is compounded with the visual power."¹ The goals of the soul and the intellect are one: reunion with their source through knowledge. The being of the intellect is knowledge or truth, so that the more it strives to know, the more it can be. (De d. ig., III, ix). Unless it seeks to know, the intellect-soul dies for knowledge is its being, and therefore, there is death to that which makes a man what he is. Thus, for Cusanus, the purpose and natural desire of the intellect is the pursuit of the highest or religious truths. After death our learned ignorance will become certain knowledge and this will bring an indescribable and eternal joy. Salvation will be the

¹Ibid., I.
intellectual satisfaction which gives fulfillment to our godlike natures. Then the "whole man becomes his intelligence which is spirit and his body (still truly a body) is absorbed into the spirit" (De d. ig., III, ix). It is through the intellect, which is one with the spirit and soul and which is modeled on the Intellect, that we can seek God if we wish, can learn about Him and ultimately find Him. The human intellect is God in man and man when he is in God. The emphasis on the idea of intellect in Cusanus--its power, potential and religious significance--cannot be overestimated.

We see from this outline of Nicholas' epistomology that he views humans as the highest reality in the universe because they possess intellect and this intellect operates under its own power to discover this world and the One. A contraction of the mind of God, it can operate and know, in a limited way, like its Source, just as the finite line finds its source and characteristics in the infinite line. Thus the human mind is capable within limits of understanding and creating. The mind, holding within it the inherent images which make understanding possible, is the source of all the arts and inventions. All of this reflects Nicholas' extremely positive attitude toward the human mind. Possessed with this powerful tool, man can surely face the world with self-confidence. It is man's mind, the greatest actual existence, which conveys a quasi-existence on the universals and other natural laws. He naturally pursues and applies knowledge. This optimistic attitude is seen in this defense of the status of the earth among other inhabited planets:
Now, even if inhabitants of another kind should exist in the other stars, it seems inconceivable that in the line of nature anything more noble and perfect could be found than the intellectual nature that exists here on this earth and its regions. (De d. ig., II, xii)

It is possible to conclude from Nicholas' ideas that he feels the human intellect is godlike and, therefore, creative, active, and noble. His conception stresses this positive view at all times:

Man is God, but not absolutely, because as man, he is thus a human god. Man is also the universe, but he is not concentratedly everything, because he is man, Man is thus a microcosm or a human universe. In the region itself of humanity, thus, its power includes god and the whole universe.¹

The implications of Nicholas' views on human existence and thought support and enhance his ideas on individuality. His metaphysic emphasized the reality of any individual existence by eliminating the actual existence of universals or emanations. Without any realities between God and the visible world, the only reality which can be understood or studied is the finite. The human mind stands at the top of the hierarchy of finite being. It is not a mirror for ideas but an active agent comprehending reality and forming the universals, which it is able to do because of its godlike nature. If the human mind, operating at the level of intellect, is thus free (relatively) and noble, then so is man because the being of man is his intellect. The individual in

¹De coniecturis, II, xiv.
Cusanus' scheme would be interested in this world, mostly because the finite reality yields knowledge from which to draw analogies about infinite reality. The individual recognizes both his capabilities and his limitations and would see himself as the highest form of finite life.

This positive tone in Nicholas' attitude toward individuals is unvarying. It is underscored by the enthusiastic tone of his writing. It is assumed by him that the inherent drive of the intellect for knowledge of the infinite is so pervasive that it is a consistent and pervasive passion for all. The idea that his own metaphysic would tend to prove that this drive would exist by degrees, thus allowing for evil, disinterest, stupidity, etc., does not concern him. Such intellects will suffer intellectual death which is real death, but this idea is mentioned only in passing because for Nicholas it is evidently almost unbelievable that any intellect would so violate its god-given nature which is to seek knowledge. The intellectual drive is not a matter of degrees then for Nicholas and each individual seeks to fulfill its nature totally. Capacity may vary but not desire.

It also does not seem to bother Nicholas that each individual must accept that his view of the truth will always be conditioned. He insists in fact that absolute truth is unknowable, and that the limited truth ascertained by an intellect is only one view. For example, he says in De visione Dei that a lion would see God as a lion. Thus the individual for Cusanus may feel that his intellect's grasp of the Infinite and his ideas
in general are as legitimate as anyone else's, for they come from a contraction of the infinite, yet he must also accept the validity of every other. If all the truth we can ever know is relative, even a relative view of the truth can only be relative. (Nicholas seems inconsistent here for he uses his arguments about our relative knowledge of the ultimately unknowable truth to support what he considers to be the absolute truth.) While the limits of knowledge might disconcert some, this problem of the relativity of our knowledge never discourages Nicholas. The intellect continues to pursue learned ignorance, accepting its limited power but enthusiastically confident that it is drawing ever closer to the Unknowable.

The individual human for Cusanus is a wonderful creation. Using the Platonist conception of microcosm, he emphasizes individualness by stressing that each is the highest form of reality, utterly unique and capable of freely thinking and acting. The entire tone of Nicholas' writings adds to this feeling of joy in the potential of individuals to understand and to draw closer to the Absolute.
CHAPTER V

THE INDIVIDUAL IN CUSANUS' RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

The specifically religious thought of Nicholas of Cusa reflects his positive and optimistic attitude toward the individual and emphasizes the personal experience of God. This is seen in his views of human nature and salvation, in his mysticism and in his comments on the role of the Church.

First of all, Nicholas' theology is rooted in his metaphysical perception of human nature. He demonstrates that the essence of the universe is humanity and, of course, humanity exists only in individuals. This ennobling view of human nature is taught by Nicholas in order to explain that salvation can only come through Christ. Because of his metaphysical system, he can show that the universal limited maximum must be human nature at its maximum perfection: Jesus. He arrives at this by explaining that no individual member of a species can be the maximum of the species for this individual member would then have to possess all the potentials and unlimited perfections of the entire species. This is not possible for a finite creature (De d. ig., III, iii). Neither can a finite creature be the equal of any other member of his species because equality lacks degrees and creatures can only exist by degrees. Any maximum member of a species is necessarily an absolute and incapable of being "more" or "less." The maximum
member of any species would have to possess all the possibilities of all the other genera and species and would thus have to be the absolute maximum (De d. ig., III, iii).

However, says Nicholas, if such a creature were to exist who possessed all the possibilities of limited existence, it would have to fulfill two necessary qualifications. First, it would have to be a member of the species which "would exhibit itself as the fullest perfection of the universe and every individual in it" (De d. ig., III, iii). This species would have to be the species of man for it is human nature which "is raised above all the works of God, and made a little lower than the angels" (Ibid.). The second qualification for this maximum individual would require that the maximum of the species would have to be a single member of this species of man because humanity exists only when contracted in individuals. This maximum human individual would then be "the universal contracted entity of each creature through his union with the absolute, which is the absolute entity of all things." (Ibid.) This person is the limited maximum, contracted from the absolute. As the highest equality existing without degree it is the Word itself. (The words "Jesus," "God," "limitability" or act, "Equality" and "universe" seem to be used interchangeably in Cusanus even though at times he is trying to describe distinctions in their essential oneness.)

All the points so carefully established by Nicholas about the triune nature of the simple Maximum, the degrees of finite creatures, the common essence of all things and the impossibility of
absolutes outside of God are all brought together to confirm that Jesus is the Word. He shows that the Maximum Creature must be the Absolute Universal or the Form of forms. Conversely he shows that the Absolute Universal must be the perfect human individual which as the highest species summarizes all the possibilities of other life. Thus, he says, "God Himself would by this assumed humanity become all things in their limitation in that humanity" (De d. ig., III, iii). He explains this order while stressing that it is not temporal for it transcends time:

First then, stands God the creator. Next is God and man, whose created humanity has been assumed into the most intimate possible union with God, and, as being the universal limitation of all things, is hypostatically and personally united with the absolute power behind the being of all things, that he may exist by the most absolute God through the universal limitation, which is humanity. In the third place all things are in their limited being, so that what they are they might be in a still better order and manner (De d. ig., III, iii).

Jesus, humanity at its perfection, is also the limited maximum and is therefore the link between the finite and the infinite. Therefore, the essence of the universe is Jesus who is maximum humanity, which means the essence of the universe is humanity:

In all things and all in Him, God is there without any variation of his absolute power to create, in unity with the maximal humanity of Jesus; in Him the maximal man cannot exist except in the maximal fashion. Jesus is thus the absolute creative power of God and in Him

1 Books I and II of De docta ignorantia are a preparation for the demonstrations of Book III.
as in the Son, the middle person, the eternal Father and the Holy Spirit dwell. All things are in the Word; in that most high and most perfect human nature which mightily embraces all createable beings, all things exist that all fullness may dwell in Him. (De d. ig., III, iv)

We see here Nicholas' high regard for human nature. Man is essence, his contracted self is God and the essence of God is humanity.

The critical point in his religious scheme is not the question of why God took human form, but the fact that humans are contractions of the divine and link themselves to the infinite through the maximally perfect man who is God. He says, "Human nature is the one essential element in the universe, without which it would be neither perfect nor even a universe, and hence, if time stopped, it would be necessary for men to rise to incorruption, if the whole universe is not to perish." (Only man needs to rise because he is the perfection of all other animals,) (De d. ig., III, iv).

This view of the essential humanness of the universe is hardly a discouraging notion to individuals. Humans are not degraded in this religious view but elevated by their natures.

Secondly, the natural corollary to this divine nature of man, Nicholas accentuates the quality of human individuals by omitting any discussion of evil. He acknowledges that passions and temporal desires exist as a result of man's carnal birth but he also mentions that sensory experience is necessary to man's functioning on earth. Moreover, the senses are supposited in his incorruptible intellectual nature and are controlled by the reason. This allows man to pursue the spiritual aspirations of his real
nature which is intellectual. Nicholas says that "man is his intelligence" (De d. ig., III, iv) because man is a limitation of the essence of Jesus and the essence of Jesus is intellect—the divine intellect which is the totality or perfection of thought.

The emphasis is always on the nobility and intellectual aspects of man. Cusanus is not interested in the existence of evil or in explaining it. Suffering, disease, sin, cruel aberrations in nature and human nature are ignored in this system which so praises the divine origin and goal of the human intellect or human nature. The emphasis is always positive and there is a tone of joy when he discusses the intellect's final union with Christ. Because maximal man rose above finiteness, all men rose for they are all in human nature. Those men who have united their natures as much as possible with the intellectual nature of Christ will receive eternal life which is the knowledge of all which the intellect has so ardently desired to know. For those intellects who have denied their nature (that is, intellect) damnation is the denial of knowledge and hence death and suffering. It is man's wonderful human nature, which is the intellect or soul at its purest levels of thought, which can bring him this incomprehensible and unending joy (De d. ig., III, vi). While it is clear in his theology that those who deny Christ for any reason will not be able to fulfill their natures, the main idea is that it can be done and that the individual can intellectually will to do so. Cusanus' view of human nature and salvation are positive in every sense of the word. His few remarks about temporal and "down-
dragging" desires are perfunctory and traditional. This allows him to give a very neat and antiseptic explanation of the universe and the Faith which seems somewhat inadequate. The overall tone is so optimistic that it could only have encouraged his readers to honor their own natures and wills.

A third point to be made about Cusanus' theology is that he strongly stresses the individualness of faith and the resurrection. Individuality continues even after physical death. This is, of course, traditional Christian thinking, but nevertheless it should be noted that he is particularly careful to point out that the individual's uniqueness remains intact even in total union with the One. To have full existence a person must reach for this full envelopment with Being and yet must remain himself. Of the individual's relationship with Christ, Nicholas says that "none subsists in himself apart from this union, nor does the union destroy the individual's degree" (De d. ig., III, xii). Individuals are numerically distinct and will remain so. The person's body will exist after the end of time but it will then be of an incorruptible nature and it will be absorbed into the intellect as here the intellect is in the body (De d. ig., III, x). A person becomes his intellect after death because this is his true nature and because he no longer needs mental pictures to be furnished him by the senses and reason (De d. ig., III, vii). Thus, individuality is the only mode of true existence outside of the Absolute and its distinction will remain forever intact.

Another way in which Nicholas' religious thought enforces
the positive concept of individuality can be ascertained in his mysticism. Although he expresses only the most orthodox views about the resurrection, judgment and salvation by faith, he seeks God beyond reason. Reason has shown us this fact by teaching that any name given to something restricts it. As the absolute is beyond restriction it cannot be contrasted, compared or distinguished and, therefore, can be neither named nor known. If names are given to God, it limits Him and tends to make Him to be like a creature. To avoid this anthropomorphism, Nicholas says that positive theology needs the presence of negative theology which teaches that God is ineffable, incomprehensible and known only to Himself (De d. ig., I, xxvi).

If God cannot be known by reason, then for Nicholas the only way to know (taste, see, feel, etc.) Him is to transcend the rational order. Only the intellect can do this for it is above reason and it is an incorruptible contraction of the Intelligence. The action of the intellect is supra-temporal (De d. ig., III, ix). It can never change itself into eternal things but it can be transformed by degrees to be like eternal things and thus be freed of the temporal (De d. ig., III, ix). This transformation comes when a person loves God which is to "journey towards Him in spiritual movement" (Ibid.). Negative theology says that the individual becomes most real the more he unites with ultimate reality and he achieves this when he submerges himself into his essential self and thus transcends himself. Through meditation he may be able to savour the delights of true knowledge which is true being.
Negative theology is the best expression of the religious faith of a mystic or those of a mystical bent. With his views of the Unnamable One, Nicholas had a natural affinity for the mystic's approach to God. He wrote one specific work on mysticism, his only work which is currently in print. It was intended as a sort of handbook for the monks at the reformed Benedictine Abbey at Tegernsee. Nicholas had visited there in 1452 and was asked by their prior, Bernard de Waging (author of a work called Laudatorium doctae ignorantiae), for further help in knowing the joy of the knowledge that is beyond reason. Nicholas responded with De visione Dei which was completed in 1453 and rapidly became his most popular work.\footnote{Evelyn Underhill, introduction to The Vision of God (New York, 1960), p. xi.} It contains all the ideas of his original system but the style is very different for it is written in the form of a mediation. It is addressed to God and is full of passionate images and languages which are seldom found in the mathematically reasoned De docta ignorantia. It is organized around the truths which he perceives while he gazes on an "icon" or image of God which the artist has painted in such a way that no matter where the viewer stands the eyes in the picture seem to look directly at him. Through this analogy he can present ideas of Absolute Sight co-mingled with the simplicity of the absolute all; the conditioned view of the beholder in the way he sees, and the nature of Jesus. It is ideas rather than a series of steps to
achieve the mystical experience that are expressed in this work. Cusanus does not teach a meditational system but draws his readers to the joys of knowing the eternal by his own adoration, inspiration and concepts.

The mystical element in Cusanus is strong. He is generally acknowledged as a descendent of the fourteenth-century mystics of Flanders and the Rhineland. These men had followed St. Augustine and pseudo-Dionysius, as well as St. Bernard and Thomas Aquinas.\footnote{Ibid., p. viii.}

Evelyn Underhill writes of Nicholas' mysticism that:

More immediately he is the son of that New Devotion which arose in connection with the Brothers of the Common Life, and goes back through their founder Gerard Groote to the mighty Ruysbroek. Nicholas shares with his contemporary Gerlac Peterson—and, we must add, with Thosas à Kempis, his senior by twenty years—the inheritance of that prince among mystics. The particular temper of his mysticism, its mingling of the metaphysical and the personal, of intellectual subtlety and devotional fervour—so characteristic of the Flemish school at its best—witnesses to the influences which had moulded his soul.\footnote{Ibid., pp. viii, ix.}

Cusanus' system of thought makes the realization of God only fully possible in the mystical experience because this is the way in which supra-rational knowledge can be obtained. The mystical experience is necessarily a personal one. He stresses this in the De visione Dei in the deeply personal experience felt as the eye of the icon seems to focus totally and lovingly on the
"me" of the viewer. This personal striving is needed to obtain true knowledge and not corporate experiences. The person himself initiates the effort to find God—although this is possible because of his inherent nature. He receives his uniqueness as a direct contraction from God and he can return to Him directly by his own effort. Nicholas says that "if I render myself by all possible means like onto thy goodness, then according to the degree of that likeness, I shall be capable of the truth."¹

The individual strives for his personal experience of God. Although he does this through union with the truth, his individuality is not lost but fully obtained in the total commitment to the Being. Self-hood is never absorbed. When the individual chooses to be truly himself he obtains both himself and God.

When I rest in the silence of contemplation, Thou, Lord, makest reply within my heart, saying: Be thou thine and I too will be thine. O Lord, Thou Sweetness most delectable, Thou hast left me free to be mine own self. Thou art not mine, for Thou dost make free-will needful, since Thou canst not be mine if I am not mine own. Since Thou hast left me free, Thou dost not constrain me, but Thou waitest that I should choose to be mine own.²

The most critical element in Cusanus' theology is the individual and his personal choice to unite with the infinite through his own infinite essence. Laws, sacraments, positive theology are secondary even though worthwhile to this comprehension of God.

¹De visione Dei, IV.
²Ibid.
This experience is totally personal and although the language and ideas express the deepest possible humility, they also express that the religious experience is essentially a process within the individual personality.

Mysticism is a logical result of Cusanus' metaphysic and, as we have seen, he is grouped with other mystics because of his theology. We know of his indebtedness to pseudo-Dionysius whom he had thoroughly studied in the late 1430's,¹ and also to other mystics. It remains to be asked if his ideas on mysticism contribute at all to the idea of individuality. Mysticism in general can have a tendency to isolate the individual from the dictates of Church authorities or tradition. The mystical experience is so profound and personal that it is inexpressible, and no one can challenge the validity or deny the truth that it conveys. Thus, the individual becomes his own authority for what is true and he is more likely to accept his truth which he has experienced than the truth given him by intermediaries. Thus the mystics such as Cusanus emphasize in the strongest way the role of the individual in knowing God. This is certainly not to say that most mystics were not involved in the church community, and most were surely confident that they were part of church tradition. Yet it cannot be denied that mysticism is a highly personal means of

¹Morimichi Watanabe, The Political Ideas of Nicholas of Cusa (Geneva, 1963), discusses Nicholas' growing involvement with the study of pseudo-Dionysius after he left the Council of Basel. See pages 31-33.
establishing a relationship with God. Cusanus emphasized the ultimate frustration of any other path to God except learned ignorance which must ultimately reach beyond the rational by the search of the individual intellect and the action of the individual will. Each unique contraction of the divine essence finds his own vision of God. Although the Church also taught the sanctity and bodily resurrection of the individual and the idea of individual commitment, mysticism seems to place less emphasis on the role of the Church itself. Even though Cusanus stayed within the discipline and format of the traditional Church, his entire metaphysic and its inherent mysticism underscore the powerful and significant role of the individual in determining truth and choosing his course of action. The individual stands alone and meets God through his own self-hood. No one studying Cusanus and other mystics could entirely ignore this sense of the individual's independence and individuality.

The last point to be considered about Nicholas' religious thought and its relationship to individuals arises in the problem inherent in mysticism: what is the role of the Church? The last chapter of De docta ignorantia is devoted to this topic and it reads like an appendage because the Church fits rather uncomfortably into his metaphysical system. Nicholas was a cardinal in the Church and we know that he was devoted to the cause of Church unity which for him expressed the unity of God's truth. However, although Nicholas says all the correct and traditional things about the Church, it does not fit into his system the way the
individual-Absolute relationship does. He says that the church militant is a union of all those united to Christ as parts are to the body and that after death when all men rise by the power of Christ, the Church triumphant will also be a union of these varied parts encompassing each person in his own hierarchical niche. Because the Church victorious will be maximal ecclesiastical unity when it consists of all those bound to Christ and existing through Him, it will then coincide with the nature of Jesus "although it does not seem as perfect as the hypostatic union, which is one of natures only, or as the first divine simplicity, in which no other diversity could exist, it is nevertheless resolved by Jesus into the divine unity from which it took its rise" (De d. ig., III, xii). It is clear and consistent in Cusanus' approach here that the Church is a quasi-entity formed by individuals. The Church cannot be a reality in itself in his metaphysical scheme which states that reality can reside only in individuals. The Church then is the idea or the natural union of those in Christ who are already united in their common essence, the intellect of Jesus. Although Nicholas was not attempting to explain here the sacraments and their necessity, if any, or the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Church, it is still obvious that he does not stress the idea of the institutional Church. It is never mentioned as a required intermediary to God. The way to salvation is through Christ, the maximum universal or intellect, and the individual can choose this eternal life because his being is a limitation of that intellect. He helps to make the Church; the Church does not save him.
The individual in Cusanus' understanding could not look to the Church as a dispenser of absolute truth. As no absolute can exist outside of the One, the Church itself cannot be perfect. And as no person can comprehend the total truth anyway, each is left with the relative truths formed in his intellect which can always be more true by infinite degrees. Thus at best the Church can be the teacher of relative truths of the faith as they are best understood and interpreted at the highest levels of intellect at any given moment. No authority can actually express the truth which is inexpressible. A few individuals may rarely experience the truth by momentarily transcending the rational order, but human rational truth is learned ignorance. While Nicholas himself seemed to have absolute faith in the teachings of the Church and worked zealously for its improvement and unity, his system does not logically allow for a Church which dispenses absolutes nor which is a required intermediary to God. Every viewpoint within the Church is conditioned and individual.

However, although knowing he lacks the full truth, the individual in Cusanus' system has the confidence that what he does possess is at least some of the truth. Each intellect is a contraction of the truth and thus part of the truth. This has implications in Nicholas' religious thought. Nicholas expressed a great deal of religious tolerance in his writings, for example, which is inevitable in the sense that he felt that all peoples must have some degree of the truth for there is one truth, the maximum of all things
that can be thought. Although salvation could only come through Jesus, each religion had some truth and could be led eventually to the highest available truth.

Another example of Nicholas' view that all people share the truth is seen in reading his De mente. In this work he discusses the union of all philosophical truths but, moreover, he makes it clear that these truths are known to any individual. De mente is a dialogue in which an orator and a philosopher come to visit a common artisan (idiota) to learn about human thought and existence. Nothing could state as clearly that Cusansu felt that truth is possessed by any thinking intellect. Authority or a top position in a hierarchy of power is not necessary. The truth does not reside in an institution or exalted position but in individuals. This is the significance of Cusanus' religious thought.

\[1\text{Cusanus, De pace fidei.}\]
CHAPTER VI

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIVIDUALITY IN CUSANUS' SCIENTIFIC THOUGHT

Throughout his life Nicholas of Cusa maintained an astonishing interest in mathematics and science considering the heavy demands of his ecclesiastical career. He wrote many scientific works and experimented with instruments such as an hygrometer for measuring moisture in the atmosphere.\(^1\) He also suggested the use of the balance to aid the development of a quantitative chemical theory.\(^2\) These scientific endeavors were not separate from his metaphysical speculations but were a natural correlation of his belief in the reality of the things of this world and their relationship to the infinite whole. His scientific works complement his philosophical works and thus increase our knowledge of his attitude toward the reality and relativity of which the individual is a part.

Nicholas' metaphysic fostered the scientific attitude toward knowledge and experimentation which in turn supports his concept of individuality in a measurable reality. Nicholas held that no absolute truth was available to man but he believed that information could always be more true. This approach to knowledge

\(^1\)Crombie, p. 127.

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 255.
leads both to a tendency to challenge casually stated truths and to a desire to acquire more accurate knowledge. As we have seen, Nicholas felt that this knowledge could only come from the active pursuit of facts and observations in the natural world. Only then could the intellect form universal concepts. Although this comprehension was ultimately possible because the individual's mind was modeled on the creative Mind, nothing could be understood without the effort of the person gathering and sorting information through his senses and reason. Accurate facts give a more reliable abstract concept. Thus careful observation and measurement are basic to understanding this world or a higher reality. Secondly, this measurement and analysis was worthwhile because of Nicholas' premise of continuity in nature. Because he felt that all things are formed as contractions of the absolute essence of the One, then all things are essentially alike and, therefore, related. This attitude, along with his idea that the intellect needed accurate facts, encouraged in Nicholas the use of the empirical method. Nicholas in fact is credited with many contributions to the development of scientific methods of research. In his book on the history of medieval science, A. J. Crombie states that Nicholas was part of the early trend of "skeptical empiricism" which "had done its work of directing attention to the conditions of human knowledge which had produced some of the most important clarifications of scientific methodology."\footnote{Ibid., p. 35.}
Nicholas' empirical attitude was expressed everywhere in his writings. It was founded, of course, in his absolute acceptance that reality—other than the one transcendent Reality—resided only in this world in each individual thing. Throughout De docta ignorantia he states many times that each thing in the world resides in its own "number, weight and measure." This individualness is achieved by a unique combination of factors which he calls potency, act and nexus in one sense or which he calls the interrelatedness of the elements and operation in another sense. Thus the study of an individual thing yields information from which general analogies can be made while maintaining its totally unique identity.

Because of his attitudes toward individuality, reality and uniformity in nature Nicholas was fascinated with weight and measure. One of his dialogues in the Idiota is devoted to this topic. In this work he tells of an experiment with a willow (which was later utilized by an innovator in the scientific method, Johan Baptista van Helmont¹). His recognition of the interrelatedness of the elements, the possibilities for measurement and his idea of method are illustrated in this example:

**Orator:** There is a saying that no pure element is to be given. How can this be proved by the Ballance?

**Idiot:** If a man should put a hundred weight of earth into a great earthen pot, and then should take some Herbs and Seeds, and weigh them, and then plant or sew them in that pot, and then should let them grow

¹Ibid., pp. 256, 258.
there so long, until he had successively little by little gotten an hundred weight of them, he would find the earth very little diminished, and when he came to weigh it again: by which he might gather that all the aforesaid Herbs had their weight from the water. Therefore, the waters being ingrossed (or impregnated) in the earth, attracted a ter­restery, and by the operation of the Sunne upon the Herb were condensed were condensed into an Herb. If these Herbs be then burnt to ashes, mayst thou not guesse by the diversity of the weights of all, how much earth thou foundest more than the hundred weight, and then conclude that the water brought all that? For the elements are convertible one into another by parts, as we find by a glass put into the snow, where we find the aire condensed into water and flowing in the glass.¹

In this work Nicholas also suggested the balance be used as a way to measure the resistence of the air. His plan of using the ba­lance as a hygrometer was later described by Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) and Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519).²

Cusanus was interested in many other aspects of natural science. For example, he advocated ideas on blood and circula­tion studies, and, as we shall note more fully later, he specu­lated in astronomy as well. These interests demonstrate his in­volvement with the reality of this world and his belief that hu­man thought could progress through the application of thought to data taken from empirically gathered facts. Nicholas' metaphysic led him to the empirical method and it has been shown that his work had a direct influence on many who advanced the growth of

¹Cusanus, The Idiot in Four Books (London, 1650), quoted in Crombie, p. 100.
²Ibid., p. 101.
modern science, including Da Vinci, Harvey and Linacre, Descartes and others. Kepler acknowledged his debt to Divinus mihi Cusanus.

What are the implications of Nicholas' scientific attitude for the concept of individuality? First of all, individuals achieve great significance because they in effect become the independent judge of what is true. This happens when something is considered real only if it is recordable and measurable. If science in general, or Nicholas in particular, views reality as embodied in individual things from which observable facts can be taken in order to form general concepts, then what is true is basically sought in what can be empirically determined. Other sources of information (such as revelation, myth, authority, etc.) appear to be less reliable. While Nicholas clearly believed in the truth of revelation, he stressed that we confirm and grow closer to this truth by determining facts (and thus concepts) about actual finite things. The agent which determines these facts and draws these conclusions is each individual intellect which will also reject information which does not appear accurate. The individual naturally seeks and judges what is true and what is true is what has being or reality. The only reality we can comprehend and deal

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3Ibid., p. 450, note 3.
with is the measurable, natural world. Secondly, in addition to being his own judge of truth, the individual is emphasized by the very emphasis on this world. Somehow the involvement with the facts of nature seem to me to focus attention on progress in knowledge about this world and on those who form it. While for Nicholas these facts heighten awareness of God, it would seem as likely that they would heighten individual awareness of the self, its potential and its environment.

Another aspect of Cusanus' science has bearing on the perception of the individual. This was his view that the earth is a star in a centerless universe. Cusanus had many views on gravity, impetus and a limitless universe which were the result of his metaphysical speculations. Not possessing a telescope, his ideas emerged as a result of his thoughts on relativity and they have proved to be astonishingly accurate.

Cusanus argued that there can be no material center to the universe because there can be nothing in the universe which is an absolute. Everything that exists is a mixture of potency, act and nexus and therefore no point of absolute rest can exist about which planets could move. Without a center there is no circumference so the universe can only be explained in terms of God who is at once the center and the circumference, the absolute maximum and the absolute minimum. There is nothing beyond the universe which could contain it and "while it cannot be infinite, it cannot be conceived as finite, since there are no limits within which it is enclosed" (De d. ig., II, xi). With this established
he goes on to say that "it is evident from the foregoing that the earth is in movement...and that it does not describe in this movement the minimum circle." In addition, "neither can the sun, moon or any sphere describe a true circle by its movement since its movement cannot be on a fixed point" (De d. ig., II, xi). Nicholas realizes that when we accept this view of the earth that we accept that our perception of the world through our senses is not true but only relatively true. Thus, he says, "it is evident that this earth really moves though it seems stationary to us" (De d. ig., II, xii). The earth "is inclined to be spherical" and its movements and all movements on it are designed for the perfection of the whole (Ibid.). The earth is merely a part of "the plan of the universe" and "stands in some relation or comparison, unknown to us, to the whole region of the world, and that in consequence, through the intermediary of the universal region a certain relationship springs up between the inhabitants of this earth or region and the inhabitants of other stars..." (De d. ig., II, xiii).

Nicholas' metaphysic requires a cosmological view of the earth and the individuals upon it. This is the inevitable result of his universal-individual view of reality. Reality resides in two places and two conditions--absolutely in the Totality and relatively in the individual. However, when viewing the earth from the vantage point of the universe, the individual must take a new and rather complex view of his own role. He becomes at once both significant and insignificant. There are no realities between himself and the One and he and his planet are as relatively the
center of things as anything else. He is not at the bottom of some celestial hierarchy but the equal of all as participants in a vast, limitless universe. On the other hand, this view of the earth and the self is rather humbling. If sensory information is wrong, then it seems that nothing can really be as it appears, except perhaps the self. If the earth is not the center of things, it is merely a cog operating in an immense system. If God is nowhere and/or everywhere, perhaps he is no more than the sum of all things. These thoughts are inevitable when the individual recognizes himself in this total scheme. Nevertheless, Nicholas' metaphysic requires the individual (which was, of course, revolutionary then and commonplace now) to accept his planet as a relative existence. It is impossible to view the self in an abstract sense without being aware of the self. If there are no realities between the individual and the Totality and the entire whole is seen as inextricably involved, then intervening structures of any kind offer less identity to the individual and he is forced to look more for his identity in himself or in the Totality — the two realities. I think that Nicholas' universal view of reality requires of the individual a heightened sense of the self which for some, finding it hard to identify with an unknowable maximum, may lead to loneliness or despair.

However, the individual-universal approach of Cusanus to reality, expanded in his idea of a centerless universe, did not leave him in despair. His science was founded in optimism and was designed to irrefutably argue the truths of faith. Cusanus
had never placed God in a specific reality for he was Reality. His God had never been a static Being but a creative Process. The relationship between the members of the Trinity actively formed the universe so that God was not only the transcendent reality but a dynamic and intimate one. God was within the universe and man and He attracted humans to Him through their admiration of his creation:

Who could help admiring this craftsman who in spheres and stars and in the vast stellar spaces employs such skill that, with no discontinuity, achieves in the widest diversity the highest unity, in one single world so weighing and adjusting the vast bulk and position and movement of the stars, so minutely ordering the distances that lie between them, that each astral area, if it is to be, and the universe if it is to continue, must be just as it is and in no other way....He in each star so adjusts and proportions the parts to each other that there is in each a movement of parts that secures the whole.... (De d. ig., II, xiii)

God lies in light inaccessible which is "universally desired" and Nicholas says that if anyone wonders who they are or to what purpose they are or how they came to be there can be no answer for "He only knows by whose intelligence we are what we are" and to what purpose. The glory of the universe leads each person to seek Him and it is in this search that the individual will find his answer for "all things in Him are Himself, nothing can be wanting to thee" (De d. ig., II, xiii). Thus the view of the earth in a centerless universe leads Nicholas to seek God. This will bring an ultimate joy to the individual who, made in God's image, can become one with Him and understand with Him. Intellectual
desire combined with admiration for the designer of such a wonderful universe leads man to know that he is one with that universe. The science of Cusanus is based in optimism. Individuals are capable of thinking and of union with God. Aware of himself in the universe he does not feel alienated or alone but drawn to the totality of which he is truly one.

Nicholas' speculations in science and astronomy were not without some significance on the development of science in general, as was noted earlier, for his writings were analyzed by thinkers who followed him. His idea that the earth is in motion directly influenced Giordone Bruno and consequently Copernicus.\(^1\) His works were even the object of a group study:

The little Cusanian school which flourished in Italy about 1450, survived until the end of the century, as evidenced by the academic assembly which met at a chateau in Milan, in 1498, with Louis Marliani, Gabriel Pirovano, Louis Paciolo, Leonardo da Vinci and a throng of scholars, admirers of Nicholas of Cusa, but the philosophy occupied them less than the exact sciences.\(^2\)

Perhaps Nicholas' positive view of the intellect and its ability to measure and comprehend the world, along with his ideas of empirical method, encouraged and influenced these specific individuals.


\(^2\)Vansteenberghe, p. 449, note 1, cites De Divina proportione de Lucas de Paciolo (Venice, 1509) as confirmation for this meeting.
Nicholas' metaphysical system and its related scientific ideas were speculative undertakings, formulated without the aid of scientific instruments. However, his thoughts are in astonishing accord with the view of reality taken by contemporary scientists and astrophysicists. While I do not wish to digress from the topic of Nicholas' attitude toward the individual, it seems worthwhile to note that his view of the reality and relativity of the things of the universe are substantiated today both as actuality and ultimate mystery. Nicholas would have believed that ascertainable facts could lead us to a clearer understanding of an unknowable truth and that this would have implications for the individual, his knowledge of himself and his search for the Source.

Nicholas' ideas of the minimum and maximum as one, the intricate balance and interrelatedness of all things, the uniformity of essence, the concept of space and the formation of the universe by a single, utterly simple emanation are current facts and/or theories. Astronomers now agree, evidently with few exceptions because of recent findings in radio astronomy,¹ that the universe began in a single instant of collapse when temperature in a primal concentrate reached 10,000 million degrees. The entire mass of material that now forms the universe of our observation--the Milky Way and at least 100,000,000 other galaxies--was present at this

¹Sir Bernard Lovell, "Whence: We Are What We Know About Where We Come From" New York Times Magazine (November 16, 1975), 27ff.
instant. In order to explain the dynamics of the universe scientists have had to abandon the idea that space was absolute:

In 1916 Einstein overcame these difficulties by abandoning this concept of an absolute space in which bodies could exist independently. The equations of his general theory of relativity describe the behavior of the universe as a whole. In the theory, space is not an absolute entity—its properties are determined by the bodies contained in the universe. The solutions of the equations of relativity provide us with expanding models for the universe evolving from zero radius at the beginning of time. The great difficulty is that these evolutionary models for the universe inevitably predict a singular condition of infinite density of infinitesimal dimensions before the beginning of the expansion. In this the theory confounds itself and erodes our confidence in the applicability of the laws of physics to describe the initial condition of the universe. But now we know from measurements of the microwave background radiation that the universe is isotropic. Furthermore, some recent theorems have demonstrated that in general relativity, the effects of self-gravitation inevitably lead to isotropy and hence to the singular condition of the universe in its initial stage.1

In this quotation from an article by Sir Bernard Lovell, professor of radio astronomy at the University of Manchester, we see Cusanus' basic metaphysical conception that a single, utterly simple essence formed in a single moment all that could be in limitation and that this was at once the minimum and maximum of all. There is no circumference to the universe and it can only be explained in terms of relationships. It becomes rationally impossible to explain the maximum-minimum universe and yet it is to this fact that reason leads.

1Ibid., pp. 84 and 86. (my italics)
Like Cusanus, Lovell marvels at the intricate balance of the universe and the sensitive molecular structure which determined the universe in the first second of time. He says, "It is a remarkable fact that the existence even of stars and galaxies depends on the force of attraction between two protons." Without this balance (if the hydrogen atoms in the nuclei had been a percent higher) the hydrogen necessary to the evolution of the universe would have been transformed into helium in the first moment of time. Man's beginnings were in that same instant and Lovell stresses that "a remarkable and intimate relationship between man, the fundamental constructs of nature and the initial moments of space and time seems an inescapable condition of our existence." Nicholas would have concurred with these ideas that we cannot grasp the Source but are inextricably involved with it. Nicholas' metaphysic assisted in the development of early science and it is science which has come to support through research his original conceptions. The implications for the individual are consequently the same in that he can accept his reality and involvement with the One but can never reach or know it through his own power.

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1Ibid., p. 88.
A complete discussion of the political thought of Nicholas of Cusa is beyond the scope of this paper and its concern with the place of the individual in his metaphysical system. *De docta ignorantia* is not a political work and any conclusions from it about Nicholas' political theories would be quite secondary and would have to be inferred from the foregoing pages. However, it should be briefly noted that Nicholas did write a work of political theory, *De concordantia catholica*, early in his career while attending the Council of Basel in 1433. Later in life his letters and other articles gave a changed conception of papal authority and church government. Because the *De concordantia catholica* pre-dates his metaphysical system and because of his deep involvement with the Council, a look at these may indicate some of the sources of his metaphysics, particularly his view of the nature of individuals.

Interestingly neither the *De concordantia catholica* nor Nicholas' later support of the absolute authority of the pope actually violates the thinking of *De docta ignorantia*. The duality of his thought is always there and if one emphasizes the individuals coming together to form the whole, we recognize the element of consent and constitutional arrangements in his early thinking. However, if the emphasis is on the total unity from...
which maximum being descends through a hierarchy of beings, then we see the principle of unity expressed through the person of the pope. Events in Nicholas' life, as well as his observations at the Council, probably account for the shift in his thinking. Many writers accuse him of opportunism, and he clearly was active in always promoting his career, but others would say with equal effect that after seeing a council in action he knew that he could hardly hope to achieve his goals of unity and reform through such a cumbersome body.

Some understanding of the theory of the conciliar movement is helpful, I feel, in indicating the positions which helped shape Nicholas' thought, and, of course, I am stressing the areas which would influence his thoughts about the importance and effectiveness of individuals. The De concordantia catholica was written in support of the conciliar movement. This movement was the result of attempts of concerned Christians to heal a forty-year schism in the Church (1377-1417) which was a matter of tragic concern to those who viewed the Church as a symbol of concensus and unity in a common society. The Schism, states Brian Tierney in his Foundations of the Conciliar Theory, became a constitutional crisis within the Church and caused a ferment of intellectual activity in the attempt to find alternative theories to that of plentitudo potestatis which was held by the two unyielding popes.\footnote{Brian Tierney, Foundations of The Conciliar Theory, (Cambridge, 1955), p. 2.}
He says that eminent theorists such as Conrad of Gelnhusen, Jean Gerson, Dietrich of Niem, Pierre d'Ailly, Nicholas of Cusa and Cardinal Zabarella reasoned that no one, not even the pope, could act against the well-being of the Church.\(^1\) In the first major work of conciliar scholarship after the Schism, Conrad of Gelnhusen argued that there is a Universal Church (congregato fidelium) and a Roman Church (pope and cardinals), and that when Christ promised that his Church would never fail, he could only have meant the Universal Church because clearly popes, cardinals and even early church fathers had failed at times.\(^2\) Thus, the underlying authority of the Church is the congregato fidelium and not a personification of the Church in the pope. Conciliar theory saw the pope as a representative of the Church because of the power bestowed on him by those whom he was to represent.

Zabarella, (1360-1417), a great juristic scholar, was a conciliarist who felt that the Church could take away the pope's authority precisely because it had granted it, and that in conferring power on the pope the congregato fidelium could not irrevocably alienate its own authority.\(^3\) His fundamental premise was that the Church was one great corporation presided over by the pope and that plentitudo potestatis is a limited and derivative

\(^1\) Ibid., p. 3.

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 4.

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 5.
authority conferred upon the head of a corporation by its members. In coming to these conclusions, Zabarella drew his arguments entirely from legal sources developed in the preceding two-hundred years by the church canonists. Tierney says of this tradition:

The transition from the idea of a superiority inherent in Pope-and-Council to that of a superiority in the Council acting against the Pope is one of the most important developments in conciliar theory between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries; and there were certain elements in early canonist thought that could encourage the growth of this later doctrine though it was not usually held by the canonists themselves. Rather surprisingly, in view of their frequent references to the divine origin of papal authority... the extreme view that papal authority was in some sense derived from Councils was quite familiar to Decretasts and even found some measure of support in their work.

Thus, the canonist writings were the primary source of the conciliar theory. Nicholas of Cusa was a trained canonist lawyer and had, in fact, studied under Zabarella's nephew. The idea of consent was inherent in these doctrines and probably influenced Cusanus' thinking then and later. The idea that power begins with the One but is potentially in individuals is not unlike his ideas about the source and potential of human thought. He writes in this vein:

It is an admirable speculation that in the people all powers, as the spiritual, temporal and corporal, potentially rests; although for the power of

1 Ibid., pp. 221 and 225.
2 Ibid., p. 55.
ruling to be actually constituted, it is necessary that from above the formative radiance which thus sets this into being, since all power is from above — and I speak of ordered power — rightly, just as earth is the necessary element from which celestial influences bring forth various vegetables and sensible things.¹

The second book of the De concordantia catholica develops his ideas on consent and representation within the Church.

In addition to canon law, Nicholas' arguments in favor of the conciliar movement seem to rest in other sources. At times he seems to be following Roman law and Justinian's Institutes.² For example, he says that "if by nature all men are equally free and equally powerful, a true and properly ordered authority of one common ruler who is equal in power can only be naturally constituted by the election and consent of others."³ This sort of passage clearly indicates that the ideas of individual equality and dignity were in his thinking very early. His goal was to establish unity through hierarchical channels, and, while he was not a radical democrat, he was quite willing to find the unity in the people themselves rather than having it imposed from above. In many of his comments Nicholas also seems to be following Marsilius of Padua, a fourteenth-century theorist who wrote a highly reasoned but polemical work, Defensoś Pacis, against the authority of the pope.⁴ Like Marsilius, Nicholas felt that the majority

¹De concordantia catholica, II, xix.
²Paul Sigmund, Nicholas of Cusa and Medieval Political Thought (Cambridge, 1963), pp. 141-42.
³De concordantia catholica, II, xiv.
⁴Sigmund, p. 153ff.
of the people should agree to the laws, that this could only re-
sult in the most beneficial possible laws, and that the weightier
part or the more educated would have to provide leadership.¹ In
a conservative way he advocates majority rule:

Legislation ought to be adopted by all or a majority
of those who are to be bound by it; since it ought
to be conferred on the whole community, that which
touches all ought to be approved by all and be pro-
duced only by the consent of all or the major part
of all. Nor can there by any possibility of being
excused from obedience to a law when each one has
imposed it on himself.²

Nicholas drew on many sources for his defense of the con-
ciliar movement and his De concordantia catholica is considered
by at least one scholar to be "the last and the most nearly com-
plete expression" of the theories of the conciliar movement and
its reaction against current church practice.³ Striving for a
universal concordantia through the union of varied groups, Nicholas
designed a plan which recognized and defended the right of indivi-
duals to be involved in that which affected them in both the tem-
poral and secular realms.

As a work of conciliar scholarship the De concordantia
catholica was written very late. The movement had already suc-
ceeded in reunifying the Church at the Council of Constance in

¹Alan Gewirth, Marsilius of Padua - The Defensos Pacis (New
Haven, 1956) Book I, chapter xii, pp. 3-6.

²De concordantia catholica, Preface, p. 318.

³Sigmund, p. 11.
1417, and by 1433 was actually ending its period of rather lim-
ited effectiveness. However, the movement had stimulated thought
about the nature of authority and the place of individuals as
suppositories or receivers of that authority. Nicholas gave a
full expression of these views in his major political work and
we see in them his early recognition of the involvement of the
natures of the individual and the One. Authority and power re-
side in individuals through "the formative radiance which sets
them into being" and acting together they can confer power on a
ruler. A ruler's authority is a man-made conception, reflecting
the hierarchical degrees of being and thought which are contracted
into the human mind, but the essential power is with the indivi-
duals who are the actual reality.

In his search for a respublica christiana, Nicholas handled
ideas about individuality which are treated more fully in his
metaphysic. If later he came to feel that unity was better im-
posed from above through the pope than from below through the
people, it is still possible to see in his political theory a
strong consideration of the individual and the idea that it is
human minds which formulate and authorize the institutions and
universals which order the finite world. Power does not descend
down through a series of steps but upward from the godlike na-
ture of individual people.
CHAPTER VIII

NICHOLAS THE INDIVIDUAL

Inevitably, after studying the creative output of any person a curiosity about his personal life is aroused, and perhaps even more so if we have been analyzing his views on individuality. As Nicholas was concerned with individuality, we wonder about his own. Two areas about Nicholas are of interest in relation to this particular study. Although Nicholas had no theory of personality, he did believe that everything existed in relativity, so a personality and the development of an individual intellect would not be absolutes but the product of the interaction of innumerable factors. Perhaps two or three of these can be suggested with some degree of accuracy and, thereby, indicate some of the reasons Nicholas may have expressed such a strong feeling for the individual in his view of existence. Secondly, we may look at Nicholas' life to see if he sensed and asserted his own individual potential in any way. If he actually felt that individuals can think and act effectively and creatively, we would expect an activist as well as a contemplative side to his life, even if very limited. In general the study of Nicholas' life indicates that he lived in a variety of situations which strengthened the idea of individual potential as well as an interest in the things of this world, and that Nicholas was conscious of his own abilities and interests and within traditional limits took highly personal stands.
Nicholas was born in 1401 at "the modest village of Cues" on the Mosel River in Germany. This area is neither remote nor isolated as it borders several other countries and the town itself had regular contact by the river with larger, neighboring towns. Whatever the effects of a geographical region on a personality, there is no question that Nicholas was born into a middle-class family. His parents, Catherine Roemer (d. 1427) and Johan Cryfts (d. 1450/1451) were both from respectable, devout families. They had two sons and two daughters and the family lived very adequately from the father's prospering boat company which operated between Koblenz and Trier. After examining what materials are available about the father, Vansteenberghe concludes that he was "a little unpolished perhaps in character, but honest and good" but he occasionally manifested "one of those explosions of temper...of which the life of Nicholas himself is not exempt." Nicholas seems to have been fond of his family, contacting them over the years, as well as of his village where he established a hospice, library and chapel which celebrated its five hundredth anniversary in 1968 and which still houses Cusanus' extensive personal library.

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1 Vansteenberghe, p. 5 and Sigmund, p. 1.
2 Jasper Blystone, p. 298, quoting Havelock Ellis's *Genius of Europe*.
3 Vansteenberghe, op. cit., p. 5.
4 Ibid., p. 5 and 6.
For some reason, usually attributed to his father's temper, Nicholas left home between the ages of twelve and fourteen and was befriended by a local count, Theodoric von Manderscheid, who sent him to Deventer to be educated. Almost every source agrees that Nicholas' studies with the Brothers of the Common Life account for his strong mystical strain, his dependence on Eckhart, and his excellent background in the classics. This school emphasized learning for personal growth—not for learning's sake—piety, and a wide variety of reading. Following their founder, Gerard de Groot, the brothers wished to achieve and demonstrate Christian perfection without vows but rather through personal reform, example and humility. They emphasized that this Christianity was available to all, not just an ecclesiastical or aristocratic elite. Deventer's teachings on the equality and personal nature of Christianity may have stayed with Nicholas; he surely retained his classical training.

In 1416 at age fifteen he was matriculated at the University of Heidelberg with nine other clerks of the archdiocese of Trier. He spent three years there, probably earning a baccalaureus in

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1 Betts, p. 5 and Underhill, p. viii.
2 Dolan, p. 11.
3 Vansteenberghe, p. 7.
4 Dolan, op. cit., p. 10.
5 Betts, p. 5.
artibus from this school whose teachers generally represented a nominalist philosophy. From there he went to Padua where he stayed from 1417 to 1423. The University of Padua was probably the most outstanding school of its time, rivaled only by Bologna. Gathered there were the leading minds in the three fields which attracted Cusanus: canon law, humanism and mathematics/astrology. And each of these areas influenced him in the formation of his thought. In the area of canon law Padua had teaching at the time of Nicholas' arrival, Bartholomew Zabarella, nephew of the great canonist Franciscus Zabarella (1360-1417) who had also taught at Padua from 1319 to 1411. Here Nicholas was also the student of another leading canonist and humanist, Giuliano Cesarini. Canon law was Nicholas' official field of study and he received his doctorate of canon law in 1423 at age 23. At Padua, however, he also studied under Prosdocimo di Beldomani, a widely respected professor of mathematics and astronomy. At the same time he began his work and friendship with Toscanelli, the Florentine mathematician. Moreover, another influence entered his studies at Padua, one which seems to be slighted in some of the biographical

1 Watanabe, p. 300 and Vansteenberghe, p. 8.
2 Watanabe, p. 301.
3 Watanabe, Nicholas of Cusa, pp. 13 and 29.
4 Bett, p. 7.
5 Vansteenberghe, p. 11.
materials. Padua was the center of the humanist movement and some aspects of this humanism are seen in Nicholas' work: an interest in the recovery and disciplined analysis of manuscripts, a sense of historical criticism of manuscripts, increased study of Greek and Greek writings, the emphasis on high personal goals for the individual, and an emphasis on the moldability and improvement of a man through study. Although these were not the exclusive domain of the humanists nor the only things humanists cared about, they were ideas being strongly promoted at Padua by the men Nicholas was meeting. He maintained then and throughout his life an active correspondence and friendship with many of the men whom we traditionally label as humanists: Aeneas Sylvius, Valla, Bessarion, Traversi, Poggio, Orsini, Pizolpassus, Leonard Bruni, Thomas Parentucelli, Cesarini, Decembrio and others.¹

Some background is necessary to understand the ferment in Padua at the time Nicholas was there, and which may also amplify some of the ideas to which he was being exposed. Padua was witnessing a new emphasis in scholarship. After the medieval renaissance of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and the rapid acquisition of Aristotelian logic and Moslem learning, the universities had expanded. All of this new material was assimilated, interpreted and taught and the scholastic method which developed emphasized logic, speculation and metaphysics. The purpose of the

¹Ibid., pp. 18-32.
resulting systematic study of literary, philosophical, legal and scientific texts was generally clerical or professional training. In the last half of the fourteenth century, however, some new ideas on the topics and purpose of education were introduced into Italy. Petrarch (1304-1374) had become a great discoverer and collector of ancient manuscripts and his library was "the most remarkable collection of ancient books formed since ancient times." This library was preserved at the University of Padua after his death where his friends continued his interest in classical learning. The neighboring Venetians also supported this new pursuit of Greek studies, probably because of their commercial interests. The availability of the manuscripts stimulated a new approach to critical scholarship, new topics and the desire to learn Greek. Two famous teachers at Padua in Petrarch's time were Paulas Venetus and P. P. Vergerius, both of whom promoted the new learning. Vittorini da Feltro, later a great humanist educator, and Guarino Veronna, who became the best Greek scholar in Italy, came to Padua to study under these men. (Cusanus' personal library contains

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3 Woodward, *op. cit.*., p. 3.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., p. 5.
translations by Guarino and Filelfo, one of the few Italians who could read and write Greek in the first quarter of the fifteenth century. In 1407 Gasparino Barzizza was secured by the faculty at Padua for its chair of Rhetoric. He was considered the greatest Latin scholar of the time and he established the Ciceronian tradition in the revival of the classics. Another noted scholar at Padua when Nicholas was there was Ugo Benzi, a Hellenist, who probably knew some Greek. Interest in Greek antiquity was also stimulated at this time by the presence of Manuel Chrysoloras (c. 1350-1415) who had to come to the Studium of Florence in 1396 from Constantinople to teach and translate Greek. Northern Italy seems to have been engulfed with excitement and interest in the new Greek and Latin translations, and as we have seen much of this study was centered in Padua.

Into this milieu came seventeen year old Nicholas of Cusa who remained there until he was twenty-four. The men with whom he was associated emphasized attitudes and skills which were no doubt of use to Nicholas. One of these was the idea that the ancients could be studied for new approaches to deal with the present:

1 Ibid., p. 17.
2 Vansteenberghe, p. 29.
3 Woodward, p. 10.
4 Vansteenberghe, p. 11 and Bett, p. 6. Watanabe, p. 13, note 12, says that there is disagreement now as to whether Benzi actually knew any Greek.
5 Baca, p. 140.
The purely imitative treatment of Cicero was not the aim of Barzizza and of other scholars whom he typifies, such as Zabarella, Vergerio and Vetterino. In the widest sense these men set before themselves the reconciliation of the ancient learning with the Christian life, thought and polity of their own day; they had no dream of a dead reproduction of the past.1

Studying the ancients, the humanists then applied these earlier ideas to their day and stressed as the goal of education preparation for a public life of Christian citizenship. This was achieved through training in eloquence, erudition, physical excellence, aesthetics and especially moral virtue.2 Personal distinction was not only possible but admirable, and the entire community benefitted. Nicholas was a serious student of Cicero and a friend of many Ciceronian scholars3 who were in agreement with this goal of public service and fame through personal and moral excellence. This goal was founded on the basic humanist concept that man could be molded or trained to an exemplary state through education.

For example, Vergerio writes this summary of the *studia humanitatis*:

> We call those studies liberal which are worthy of a free man; those studies by which we attain virtue and wisdom; that education which calls forth, trains and develops those highest gifts of body and mind which enoble men, and which are rightly judged to

1 Woodward, pp. 10-11.

2 Three typical treatises by Vergius, D'Arezzo and Guarino are in the Woodward volume. Aeneas Sylvius also expressed these humanist ideals in his *De Liberoreum Educatione*.

3 Vansteenberghe, p. 10ff.
rank next in dignity to virtue only. For to a vulgar temper gain and pleasure are the one aim of existence, to a lofty nature, moral worth and fame. ¹

The humanists accepted the perfectability of an individual man through his ability to choose and then achieve high moral goals. This idea also implied the possibility of general reform as all individuals are trainable. These ideas, especially the faith in the individual's desire and ability to achieve excellence, are apparent in Nicholas' thought. ²

Another humanist influence on Nicholas' intellectual development was his interest and analysis of manuscripts. Many indexes are now available which list Nicholas' considerable personal collection. ³ He is credited with the discovery of an unknown manuscript of Plautus which contained twenty comedies of which only twelve were previously known in the West. ⁴ Nicholas brought back with him from his trip to Greece in 1438 a Greek manuscript of pseudo-Dionysius, ⁵ although there is debate as to how much Greek he could actually read. ⁶ The fact that Nicholas

¹ Vergerio, De ingenius moribus, in Woodward, p. 137.

² Alan Gewirth, pp. 104, 106. Stresses the independent thinking in Padua, noting its resistance to papal authority.

³ Jacob Marx's Verzeichnis der Handschriften Sammbing des Hospitals zu Cues bei Bernkastel al Mosel (1905) was the first. Others are listed in Watanabe, p. 28.

⁴ Bett, p. 8.

⁵ Watanabe, p. 32.

⁶ Vansteenberghe, p. 24, thinks that Nicholas was sent on the mission because he knew Greek. Honeker, as reported by Watanabe, p. 17, note 30, says that he did not know any.
had acquired a critical approach to these texts is illustrated by his attack on the authenticity of the Donation of Constantine. Rejecting all summaries and collections, he went back to the original writings and found that the Donation was not mentioned by any of the Church fathers and that letters supposedly supporting the Donation contained distinctions between bishops and clerks which were only made many years later.¹ Vansteenberghe thinks that Valla received his inspiration for his famous Declamation, which destroyed the authenticity of the Donation, from Nicholas and "one may further remember that Aeneas Sylvius was very intimate at Bale with the author of the De concordantia catholica before pressing Frederic III to submit to a council the question of the Donation of Constantine."² Cusanus approached all manuscripts with the sort of consciousness of language and historical criticism which is associated with humanist scholarship.

After leaving Padua and its various scholarly influences, Nicholas was collated by the archbishop of Trier (January 31, 1425), received benefices which enabled him to study at the University of Cologne, a center of Platonism,³ and then joined Orsini's circle as his secretary. In 1432 he went to Basel to defend the claim of his old mentor's son, Ulrich von Manderscheid, to the archbishop of Trier. There he worked with the conciliar party

¹ Watanabe, p. 155.
² Vansteenberghe, p. 28.
³ Watanabe, p. 14.
until joining the papal forces in 1436. He was sent to Constan-
tinople on a diplomatic mission in 1437 which hoped to reunite
the Church and he returned with the Greek emperor, the patriarch,
and other prelates in February 1438.\textsuperscript{1} The remainder of Nicholas' career was spent in the service of the popes. He was made a card-
dinal in petto in December 1446 and publically on December 20,
1448.\textsuperscript{2} He served as vicar general when Pius II was at the Con-
gress of Mantua and is considered to have been effective in this work.\textsuperscript{3}

In addition to his diplomatic and administrative duties, Nicholas was an inexhaustible supporter of reform, beginning with some of his works at the Council of Basel. Two main examples of his reform efforts are his trip as a papal legate in 1451 and his attempts at reforming his archbishopric of Brixen from his arrival in 1452 to his departure in 1460. In bulls of December 24 and 29 of 1450, the humanist pope Nicholas V appointed Cusanus as his legate to Germany and its neighboring countries. He charged him with announcing the jubilee year, offering certain indulgences, calling and holding provincial councils, levying censures, visiting and reforming monasteries, regulating or sometimes

\textsuperscript{1}Ibid., p. 17.

\textsuperscript{2}Bett, p. 38 and Watanabe, p. 18, note 35.

\textsuperscript{3}Watanabe, p. 19, and the general conclusion of Bett and Vansteenberghe.
abolishing excessive accumulations of benefices, and with preaching.\textsuperscript{1} As heresies and dissidence were common in the Church at that time and many rules were openly flaunted, the trip was important and Nicholas, with his knowledge of the language and his diplomatic background, was well-qualified for this duty. His trip is generally considered to have been very successful. The most glowing report is found in Pastor who says of Nicholas that "his life was a mirror of every Christian and sacerdotal virtue." He praises the effects of Nicholas' trip:

He not only everywhere admonished and punished ecclesiastics, and required them to amend, but also in his sermons instructed to other members of Christian society in all things necessary, so that many, of high as well as low estate, laity as well as clergy, were greatly moved in spirit by his words.\textsuperscript{2}

Among other things which impressed Pastor were Nicholas' willingness to live the common life on his visit to Deventer, his wearing of simple clothes, his occasional use of a mule, and his refusal to meet with his sister until she had changed from her "festal array" to a simple dress.\textsuperscript{3}

The other reform effort in Nicholas' career was considerably less successful. He was appointed to the bishopric of Brixen in the Tyrol and began active work there in 1451. Some scholars feel

\textsuperscript{1} Vansteenberghe, pp. 89-90.

\textsuperscript{2} L. Pastor, \textit{A History of the Popes}, VII, p. 131.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., pp. 107-135. (Sister mentioned on p. 132)
that Nicholas' personality, ambitions and devotion caused the violent problems which resulted while others place the blame on the evil Duke Sigmund. I have read several minute by minute accounts of the situation and subsequent developments but it all comes down to the struggle for power between pope, secular leaders, bishop and cathedral chapter. Within this traditional struggle for rights, the differing personalities acted.

The initial confrontation began over the authority for the appointment itself. In 1450 when the bishop of Brixen died, the local chapter assumed its prerogative of selecting its own bishop and elected, on March 14, 1450, Leonard Weismayer, one of its own members who was also the chancellor of the duke of Tyrol, Sigmund. They sent the nomination to the pope, Nicholas V, for confirmation. However, on March 23, Nicholas appointed Nicholas of Cusa to this same post. Legally, the chapter had the right of election from both traditional and various treaties, including the Concordat of Vienna in 1448, although the popes had held the right of reservation since the thirteenth century in order to prevent unworthy appointments. Complicating this particular struggle was the fact that Eugenius IV had paid off the emperor, Frederick III, in 1446 for his support with the lifetime right to nominate candidates to several sees, including Brixen. By the next September things were still not settled and the Duke called together the Tyrolese estates to discuss the protection of their
German rights. The pope would not surrender, insisted on the right of appointment although without any clear reason, and personally consecrated Nicholas.¹

This was the rather unfortunate and hostile beginning to Nicholas' life in the Tyrol. There is no question, however, that a reform-minded bishop was needed in the area for during the conciliar period the dukes had made many inroads into the independence of the church and there were extensive abuses of church rules and ideals. Nicholas left Rome in December, traveling slowly and reforming towns as he went. Finally he met with a mediation board in February to settle the election dispute. There were four major points in the agreement, including the garrisoning of his towns and castles with men acceptable to Sigmund and the promise of an absolutely free election after his resignation.²

This election compromise was only the first of his troubles. When Nicholas arrived in Brixen he was fifty years old, devoted to his cause, and, as Paul Tillinghast wrote, "an extremely successful man in spite of being bourgeois, an ex-conciliarist and a German."³ As a papal legate he had laid down strict, immensely detailed and rigourously enforced rules of behavior which he thought would lead to the desired inner reform. It was this

²Ibid., p. 376.
³Ibid.
approach that he brought to Brixen. During the years 1452-1454, he worked to make it a model diocese. He traveled everywhere, gave one hundred thirty sermons and held regular synods. In the ordinance of 1453, priests were ordered to give up their concubines within a month, to use a standard missal and to meet dress and behavior standards. Also, Nicholas began his reform of the monasteries which he considered the most important step in reforming the whole area. This process went well until he ran into the Benedictine nunnery at Sonnenburg. Nicholas' struggle with the abbess Verona von Stuben is a morass of legal and jurisdictional claims and it eventually drew Sigmund into the fray. Nicholas' fight with the abbess ended in April 1458 with the slaughter of the abbey's troops by Nicholas' soldiers.¹

While this situation was going on, Nicholas had also alienated some of the powerful families in the area with some of his strict rules, especially restrictions about festival celebrations. He had also lost the support of the canons of his chapter by forcing them to accept his nephew as their bishop. When that office had become vacant, the canons preferred Leonard Weismayer, the former bishop, who had been removed from the archbishopric appointment after the pope consecrated Nicholas. Henry Bett says of this act:

Hereupon Weismayer naturally reclaimed his prebend. Then Nicholas did the most indefensible act of his life. He remitted the decision to the Chapter of

¹Ibid., p. 386.
Brixen, but charged them under penalty of excommunication, to confirm his nephew in the prebend, the revenues being divided between his and Weismayer until a final decision was reached of the true bishopric of Church.¹

Four canons were excommunicated as a result of their refusal to submit to this threat. Relations with Sigmund had also deteriorated to a disastrous point and Nicholas believed that at their summit meeting in May 1457, Sigmund had tried to have him murdered. Although this has never been substantiated, there is no question that Sigmund was trying to intimidate Nicholas. In 1458 Nicholas left for Rome and did not return to the area until February 14, 1460, and trouble began immediately. On that day his vehicles were attacked and Nicholas placed the entire region under an interdict and threatened to give all the fiefs of the bishopric to the Emperor.² Sigmund then attacked with 500 horsemen and 3,000 infantry. Nicholas was forced to surrender, sign an humiliating agreement and pay 10,000 florins ransom. Naturally he rejected the validity of these concessions upon his release and the area remained under interdict until a final settlement was reached three weeks after Nicholas' death in 1464.

Even this very superficial treatment of Nicholas' years in the Tyrol indicates the considerable confusion that prevailed. This turmoil and tension at first comes as a surprise to the

¹Bett, p. 60.
²Ibid., p. 61.
reader of the philosophical and religious works of Nicholas. To some extent, however, Nicholas' approach worked. Especially in the monasteries, his methods of publicizing legislation, inspecting carefully, requiring detailed reports and strict discipline worked well, for some of his abbeys were the most reformed in all Europe.\(^1\) However, by losing the goodwill of nearly all the secular and church leaders, he lost allies in the battle for a desperately needed church reform.\(^2\) Many of his demands for castles and other rights could only have been a threat to the duke who was already in a power struggle with the Emperor. Perhaps Watanebe is right in saying that "Cusanus failure to understand clearly the extra-legal aspects of the episcopal election" led him to the protracted struggle with the duke.\(^3\) Tillinghast thinks that from the beginning a bourgeois Rhinelander would be resented in the Tyrol and that everything Nicholas did—perpetually cultivating his important outside contacts, alienating canons, offending Sigmund and the nobility, the promiscuous use of interdicts—only increased the hostility. He thinks that:

Nicholas was too petty in the Tyrol. Thus he ceased to function as the dynamic and passionately devoted apostle of loving reform, that he showed himself in his books— even the ones he composed in Sandres. Instead he became the rule-maker, the threatener, the devious schemer with foreign powers,

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1 Tillinghast, p. 378.

2 Ibid.

3 Bett, p. 64.
the wielder of ecclesiastical censures, and finally the man who fled for his life. The greatest mis-
take was in keeping him among a people who were incapable of understanding him, and whom he lacked the patience to understand. His true home was in a university or a monastery....

This negative assessment could be answered, I suppose, with comments on Nicholas' courage and willingness to fight for an unpopular but good cause. It is difficult, however, in reading the studies of these events in the Tyrol not to sense that Nicholas' inability to compromise did more harm than good for his long-term goal.

It is interesting to reflect briefly on the relationship of Nicholas' work as a reformer to his general thought. In some strange way his failures in this area seem to have an indirect relationship to what could be considered the flaw in his metaphysical system—the problem of personality and evil. There is almost no mention of evil in Cusanus' work except for the acknowledgement of Adam's fall and the need for salvation. The tone of De docta ignorantia is completely optimistic because it is assumed that reason and good intent are natural and will lead people away from sensual pleasures and toward their only true happiness which is the intellectual striving to know God. This positive approach, of course, reflects Cusanus' faith in the individual's

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1 Tillinghast, p. 390.

2 Cusanus' discussion of this topic is found in chapter IV of Book III, De docta ignorantia.
worth, intelligence, educability, and nobility - in other words, his godlike image. Evil, if anything, is a lapse from what is real, but it is not an enigma. This lack in Cusanus' system has implications both for reform work and his system in general. Henry Bett comments:

It has been remarked by Dorner (Doctrine of the Person of Christ, ii, p. 46-47) with real insight that the great defect of Nicholas' Christological doctrine lies in the fact that he had not arrived at a knowledge of the significance of the human personality, and to that knowledge none can attain who takes as little notice of sin as did Nicholas of Cusa. Everyone who possesses any religious instinct must feel that Nicholas' doctrine moves throughout in a region of bloodless abstractions, and the reason undoubtedly is that he took so light a view of the fact of evil.¹

Could it be that Nicholas' reform approach reflected such a positive attitude toward human nature that it led him to overestimate the response to a reasoned approach to God? Did he ignore the effect of personal ambitions and desires on individual behavior? Somehow it seems unlikely that Nicholas, as an experienced diplomat, would have taken such a rigid approach to Sigmund and the Tyrolese, yet he seems to have been totally confident that he could effect inner reform through the inflexible imposition of rules. Perhaps he had too much confidence in mankind's desire for good or perhaps he had too much passion for his cause which therefore justified this approach. To some extent, Nicholas was the "true believer" both as a conciliarist and as a cardinal. In either

¹Bett, p. 199.
case he was fully committed. Even his writings on religious tolerance never deviate from his belief that there is one way. What is admirable in such confidence and single-mindedness can also cause a lack of perspective. It is a curious thing to me that Nicholas, who so stressed the idea of relativity in knowledge and existence, did not apply this understanding to human situations and beliefs. At any rate it is impossible to evaluate Nicholas' reform work and perhaps what appear to be disasters were in the long run able to bring about some improvements. His handling of the Tyrolese is, of course, irrelevant in evaluating his philosophical work although it is of interest in reflecting on his thought and his life.

Nicholas' life demonstrates his confidence in the individual's ability to think and act effectively. As a middle-class citizen the only way up for him was through his personal efforts, and there is no question that Nicholas was ambitious for success in this world. Perhaps this was a result of his middle-class values, the humanist goal for fame and public service, his religious devotion--or the interaction of all three. He is heavily criticized for his "scandalous pluralism" for which he had to obtain several papal dispensations in order to hold so many income producing benefices. However, he also gave himself ardently to the cause of unity and in the eyes of many led a saintly life.

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1Bett, p. 17 and note 1, p. 18.
Whatever conclusions are drawn about the complexities of his career, his life remains an example of his faith in the reality, independence, effectiveness and intellectual desires and striving of the individual.
It is my thesis that the thought of Nicholas of Cusa gives great dignity and significance to the human individual. It was Cusanus' purpose to establish the idea of unity, and hence the simple oneness of God, creator and end of all. The idea of unity, however, implies parts. Nicholas, in order to maintain the absoluteness of the simple maximum, acknowledges only two kinds of parts or states of existence—the relative being of an individual thing and the absolute being of the One. Thus, I think that it can be directly demonstrated from his metaphysical system that he saw the natural world as the only reality other than the Maximum and that this reality was composed of utterly unique individual entities. The human individual exists in this world as a contraction of the image of God and as such is unique and godlike. He possesses a free intellect, the highest form of limited being, which is capable of moving itself to comprehend itself, its environment and the inevitable existence of the simple Whole. The intellect further knows that it cannot understand the One but that it is involved with it. Although the individual is part of the relative existence of limited things, he is also real, singular and an influencing participant in the whole.

In a recent review of Cusanian literature I read a criticism of his thought which said that Nicholas could never seem to
make up his mind if he were writing a metaphysic of verite or one of res. While I agree that both elements are emphasized, it is because they are completely involved in each other. His strength is in his recognition and balancing of these two realities. For him all individuals and oppositions have a final explanation in the impossible but inevitable simplicity of the maximum-minimum, and thus verite and res are one. His metaphysic cannot ignore either. Nicholas' thought rests in the paradox or mystery that while individuals exist in number, weight and measure, and God exists without being added to or diminished by these individual things, both exist without confusion in each other. Within this unknowable whole the individual lives in both humility and dignity.
APPENDIX

THE WRITINGS OF NICHOLAS OF CUSA

The following list is given to show the chronology and extent of Nicholas' various works. It shows the wide range of topics which interested him, even during times when his career made great demand on his time.

1433  De concordantia catholica
      Epistolae ad Bohemos
1434  De auctoritate presedendi in concilio
1436  De reparatione calendarii
1440  De docta ignorantia
1440-1445 De quaerendo Deum
       De dato Patris luminum
       De filiatione Dei
       Diologus concludens Amedistarum errorem ex gestis et doctrina concillii Basaliensis
1447  De genesi
1449  Apologia doctae ignorantiae
1450  De transmutationibus geometricis
       De arithmeticis complementis
       De quadratura circuli
1451  De sapientia
       De mente
       De staticis experimentis
1452 De novissimus diebus
1453 De mathematicis complementis
Complementum theologicum
De visione Dei.
1453-1454 De pace seu concordantia fidei
1458 De beryello
De matematica perfectione
1459 De aequalitate
De principio
Reformatio generalis
1460 De possest
Cribratio Alchorani
1462 De non Aliud
1463 De venatione sapientiae
De ludo globi
Compendium
1464 De apice theorae

A great many of Nicholas' sermons and letters have also been edited and published.
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