

NICHOLAS CUSANUS AND HIS 'NON ALIUD' AS CONCEPT OF GOD

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Abstract: This paper presents Cusanus' dialogue of 1462, named after and centred on the concept of non aliud, and exploits its speculative resources for conceiving the relationship between God and the realm of finite entities. Furthermore, it points to the elements of self-constitution of the absolute and of the latter's grounding relation towards the contingent. Finally, it is argued that Cusanus' concept of *non aliud* offers a valuable contribution to the present debate about an adequate concept of God.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nicholas Cusanus, the late medieval/early renaissance thinker, was born in 1401 and died at the age of 63 in 1464. In the springtime of 1462, he completed a work that is, in the critical edition, entitled *Directio speculantis seu de non aliud*.¹ It narrates a conversation between four thinkers that represent different philosophical schools. Two of them, Abbot Giovanni Andrea dei Bussi and Pietro Balbo Pisano, are dealing with Proclus's commentary on *Parmenides* and the *Theologia Platonica* of the same author. The third, who takes part in the said conversation, is the Portuguese medical man Fernando Martíns de Roriz, who

1 Nicholas of Cusa, *Directio speculantis seu de non aliud*, ed. Ludwig Baur and Paul Wilpert (Meiner, 1944), henceforth referred to as Nicholas of Cusa, *De non aliud*. Cf. also the more recent edition of *De non aliud. Nichts anderes*, ed. Klaus Reinhardt (Aschendorff, 2011). Concerning the background of the (varying) title cf. Klaus Reinhardt, "Eine bisher unbekannte Handschrift mit Werken des Nikolaus von Kues in der Kapitelsbibliothek von Toledo", in *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft* 17, ed. Rudolf Haubst (Grünewald, 1986), 111–14. I quote the text of 'De non aliud' and all other works of Cusanus according to the Meiner edition and the English translation of Nicholas of Cusa, *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa* (Banning, 2001).

is familiar with Aristotelian philosophy. Finally, we have Nicholas Cusanus himself, who is actually preoccupied with the writings of Dionysius Areopagita.²

The conversation is centred on the concept of *non aliud*, which Cusanus uses to describe the divine in its relation to the finite. This concept will portray the absolute, for two reasons: it defines itself and it grounds what is finite. After having outlined Cusanus' ideas, I will consider how the author contributes, through the conception based on *non aliud*, to contemporary philosophical theology.

II. ACCESS INTO THE CONCEPT OF 'NON ALIUD'

It is at the very beginning of *De non aliud* that the author formulates the central insight. By doing so, he intends to establish a valuable concept of the absolute — i.e. an instance independent of everything else, an auto-referential and radically 'first' being. So, Nicholas³ introduces the concept of *definitio* by asking

2 Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *De non aliud* (h XIII, 3) 1,1. Mischa v. Perger, "Nichts anderes: Ein Fund des Cusanus auf der Namenssuche für das erste Prinzip aller Dinge", *Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 13, no. 2 (2004): 116–18, offers further information concerning the conversation partners and describes the historical setting. Corresponding to the aforementioned philosophical schools, investigations in the history of philosophy have tried to identify sources for the formula of *non aliud*. While, for historical reasons, a direct dependence on the *Theologia Platonica*, written by Proclus, seems improbable (cf. Davide Monaco, *Deus Trinitas: Dio come 'non altro' nel pensiero di Nicolò Cusano* (Città Nuova, 2010), 182–85), Meister Eckhart is a good candidate for having furnished ideas to Cusanus. A formulation in his *Sermo „Deus unus est“* (*Sermo* 29) — „In deo enim non est aliud“ — seems to allude to *non aliud*; see Meister Eckhart, *Die lateinischen Werke, herausgegeben im Auftrag der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft*, ed. Josef Quint and Konrad Weiss (Kohlhammer, 1936-2006), no. 270. Cf. Egil A. Wyller, "Zum Begriff ‚non aliud‘ bei Cusanus", in *Nicolò Cusano agli inizi del mondo moderno: Atti del Congresso internazionale in occasione del V centenario della morte di Nicolò Cusano, Bressanone, 6-10 settembre 1964*, ed. A. Pattin (Sansoni, 1970), 419. The central motif of *non aliud* appears also in Meister Eckhart, *Expositio Libri Sapientiae* Cap. 7 v. 27a, n. 154, and *Expositio Sancti Evangelii secundum Iohannem* Cap. 1 v. 11, n. 99, cf. Meister Eckhart, *Die lateinischen Werke, herausgegeben im Auftrag der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft*, no. 2; cf. Jean Greisch, *Du 'non-autre' au 'tout autre': Dieu et l'absolu dans les théologies philosophiques de la modernité* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2012), 49, fn. 1. Finally, Dionysius Areopagita, in his *Mystica Theologia*, holds that God can neither be named nor that he is something 'other', which emphasizes the 'mystery' of *non aliud*. In *De non aliud* (h XIII, 5) 1,5, Cusanus refers to *De Mystica Theologia* V: „οὔτε λέγεται οὔτε νοεῖται“; „οὔτε ἄλλο τι τῶν ἡμῖν ἢ ἄλλω τινὶ τῶν ὄντων συνεγνωσμένων.“ Cf. Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *Corpus Dionysiacum: Vol. 2: De coelesti hierarchia. De ecclesiastica hierarchia. De mystica theologia. Epistulae*, ed. Günter Heil and Adolf M. Ritter (de Gruyter, 1991), 149.

3 With 'Nicholas' I always refer to the literal figure of the *De non aliud*.

what it is “that most of all gives us knowledge.”⁴ Here we should not immediately think of ‘definitions’ we deal with in daily philosophical work. I propose an understanding of this Latin term *definitio* in a rather broad sense, as the giving of a special shape or form to something, like *Bestimmung* or *Umgrenzung* in German. We might even speak about the *definitio* as determining its object, but we should not associate ‘determinism’ to this way of determining.

Nicholas uses two further concepts in order to characterize the *definitio* he points to. The first one is *oratio*, the second one *ratio*.⁵ In his translation, Hopkins combines both by saying “constitutive ground.” I would rather like to distinguish two levels, which are highlighted by the explicit use of *oratio* and *ratio*. The first one, we might call ‘logical’ or ‘of predication’; the definition is, therefore, just the way we speak about something. The second one, however, indicated by *ratio*, is rather an ‘ontological’ level. *Ratio* is, according to Cusanus and former thinkers, linked to the essence of an entity, not to (our) predication only. I am emphasizing this double level in the use of *definitio*, because it helps to defend the author against being accused of an unjustified transition from a logical to an ontological level. Speaking of *definitio*, he is, from the beginning, aware of both dimensions.

Etymologically, the substantive derives from the verb *definire*. In order to justify this particular comprehension it is added that “it defines everything” (*quia omnia definit*). Why is this accurate, we may enquire? Cusanus uses the term in the singular. Obviously, he does not point to the many concrete definitions of singular states of affairs, but to the general process of defining something. Furthermore, he has in mind *every* (imaginable) state of affairs that can be defined, determined, characterized or that can be given a shape. However, on this general or formal level, it makes sense to ask whether a definition that defines everything also defines itself.⁶ It seems that at this point, the discourse gains a second feature. One still speaks about the general process of defining, but equally about a special, supreme, all-encompassing definition. This definition is said to define itself, because it does not exclude anything. Therefore, Nicholas intimates that “if [the] definition defines everything, then does it define even itself.”⁷

4 *Ibid.*, (h XIII, 3) 1,3: „Abs te igitur in primis quaero: quid est quod nos apprime facit scire?“

5 Cf. *ibid.*, (h XIII, 4) 1,3: „[...] oratio seu ratio est definitio.“

6 Cf. *ibid.*: „Si igitur omnia definit definitio, et se ipsam igitur definit?“

7 *Ibid.*: „Vides igitur definitionem omnia definientem esse non aliud quam definitum?“

By introducing the concept of *definitio*, the author certainly has in mind the Aristotelian ‘essential definition.’ In contrast to the ‘nominal definition,’ an ‘essential definition’ makes clear what something is.⁸ Of course, the familiar way of defining something by *genus* and *differentia specifica* is not followed here. Nonetheless, given the reference to the ‘essential definition,’ the formulated supposition here becomes (more) comprehensible and allows for a more speculative interpretation: Nicholas is talking about a definition which defines everything in its essence. So it must carry, in some sense, the essence of everything — or at least something decisive about this essence — in itself. If this is the case, then it seems more plausible to hold that, also on the ‘ontological’ level, this *definitio* ‘is’ all that it defines, namely, the defined (*definitum*).

Fernando, a participant already referred to in the relevant conversation, gives his assent to what has been said, stating that the *definitio* (of everything) is also the *definitio* of itself.⁹ This statement follows from the former one that the *definitio* defines everything, without excluding anything. Therefore, it also defines itself. As it still seems not clear to Fernando which definition they are speaking about, Nicholas makes him arrive at the thesis that *non aliud* — contained in the foregoing claim that the definition which defines everything is ‘not other’ than what is defined — is the instance one looks for, the instance that defines itself and everything else.¹⁰

The *non aliud* enters into the definition of every self-identical being. Please note that this self-identity is put into words exactly by the negative delimitation from other beings. Therefore, one should not simply link *non aliud* to *idem* that has played an important role in the earlier *Dialogus de genesi*.¹¹ In his later writing *De venatione sapientiae*, Cusanus clearly refuses the equation

8 Cf. Heribert M. Nobis, “Definition I,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter (Schwabe & Co., 1972), 31. Regarding the λόγος τοῦ τί ἐστὶ see Aristotle, *Prior and Posterior Analytics*, ed. William D. Ross (Clarendon Press, 1949), II 10, 93b; 7, 92b and elsewhere.

9 Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *De non aliud* (h XIII, 4) 1,3: „Video, cum sui ipsius sit definitio.“

10 Cf. *ibid.*, (h XIII, 4) 1,4: „Pauca, quae dixi, facile rimantur, in quibus reperies ‚non aliud‘; quodsi toto nisu mentis aciem ad li ‚non aliud‘ convertis, mecum ipsum definitionem se et omnia definientem videbis.“

11 Cf. Max Rohstock, *Der negative Selbstbezug des Absoluten: Untersuchungen zu Nicolaus Cusanus’ Konzept des Nicht-Anderen* (de Gruyter, 2014), 72. Concerning the higher value of the negative formulation, Rohstock, *Der negative Selbstbezug des Absoluten*, 91 fn. 307, states that Cusanus does not merely talk about each X’s being identical with itself, but that he rather holds that each X is not-other toward itself. According to Rohstock, this move does justice to the perspective on what is ‘other’ to this X as well.

of both terms.¹² The temptation to interpret *non aliud* simply as the negative formulation of *idem* certainly derives from the nominalization of *non aliud* which allows for the forgetting of its grammatical peculiarity. This tendency is fostered by Cusanus himself and others who have often added the definite article 'li' to *non aliud*, a move alien to the classical Latin language. In any case, we should understand *non aliud*, in defining other beings and itself, both as linguistic expression and as metaphysical definition, doing in this way justice to Cusanus' understanding of *definitio*, as explained before.¹³

In what follows, I want to focus on the concept's speculative resources.

III. THE SPECULATIVE RESOURCES OF THE CONCEPT

The concept *non aliud*, as introduced by Cusanus, serves as illustration of the absolute by defining both itself and everything that is *aliud*, finite. I will now further focus on these two points that we have already taken notice of in the foregoing passages. In what follows, I will stay with the author who develops the idea in both aspects, entangled in one another. There is a strong reflection by Cusanus about the status of *non aliud* in relation to God himself. However, I will skip the passages in which he tries to give a Trinitarian interpretation of *non aliud*,¹⁴ although he is generally convinced that God's creation is based on the inner-divine relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Definition of Itself and Everything Else

As Fernando utters some doubts, Nicholas continues to defend the thesis in question, that is, of the self-defining *non aliud*. He argues for its validity in an apagogical way: First, *non aliud* cannot be *aliud*, in the way that different finite beings are distinguished from each other as 'others' (*alia*). In the realm of the finite, to be 'other' constitutes the basic relativity of beings. It does not bear any distinguished direction; everything is 'other' in relation to the

12 Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *De venatione sapientiae* (h XII, 40) 14,41: „Advertas autem, quomodo li non aliud non significat tantum sicut li idem.“

13 See Nicholas of Cusa, *De non aliud* (h XIII, 4) 1,3 (see footnote 5). Cf. Sandro Mancini, "L'estrema soglia della riflessione trascendentale di Cusano: nient'altro che nome divino", in *La persona e i nomi dell'essere*, ed. Francesco Botturi (Vita e Pensiero, 2001), 871.

14 Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *De non aliud* (h XIII, 12f.) 5,18f.

other.¹⁵ One should note in this context, that also Thomas Aquinas, when dealing with the doctrine of the transcendentals, explains *aliquid* as *aliud quid*, i.e. as the relativity proper to each being insofar as it is and as it is distinct or separated (*divisum*) from others.¹⁶ If it is impossible that *non aliud* is defined by its relation to other beings, one is left with the possibility that it is defined by the relation to itself:

FERDINAND: Indeed, I see clearly how it is that Not-other is not other than Not-other. No one will deny this. — NICHOLAS: You speak the truth. Don't you now see most assuredly that Not-other defines itself, since it cannot be defined by means of [any] other? — FERDINAND: I see [this] assuredly [...].¹⁷

The relation to itself, in which the definition takes place, is a negative one. Now, in the second step, Cusanus also shows that *non aliud* defines everything else. For this purpose, he refers to two examples in which are defined — apparently in a tautological manner — the 'other' and the sky:

For what would you answer if someone asked you, 'What is other?' Would you not reply, 'Not other than other'? Likewise, [if someone asked you] 'What is the sky?' you would reply, 'Not other than the sky.'¹⁸

According to Nicholas, this way of defining *aliud*, the sky, or whatever else, has the advantage of being most precise and most true. Of course, one could respond that a definition that is, superficially considered, tautological, cannot be a definition to be taken seriously. Such a response does not occur. But *if* it did, how could it be rejected, while holding fast to Cusanus' intentions? Obviously, the positive, concrete content of what something is, is not explained; *aliud* is not described here in its properties with regard to other finite beings. Nonetheless, the definition with the help of *non aliud* is not simply tautological. It rather de-

15 Cf. the elucidations, including the hint to the definition of otherness as "relative non-being" in Plato's *Sophistes*, in Gerda v. Bredow, "Gott der Nichtandere: Erwägungen zur Interpretation der cusanischen Philosophie", in *Im Gespräch mit Nikolaus von Kues: Gesammelte Aufsätze 1948-1993*, ed. Hermann Schnarr (Aschendorff, 1995), 51.

16 Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate* q. 1, a. 1, corpus (*Editio Leonina* 22/1, 5).

17 Nicholas of Cusa, *De non aliud* (h XIII, 4) 1,4: „Ferdinandus: Video equidem bene, quomodo ‚non aliud‘ est non aliud quam non aliud. Et hoc negabit nemo. — Nicolaus: Verum dicis. Nonne nunc certissime vides ‚non aliud‘ se ipsum definire, cum per aliud definiri non possit? — Ferdinandus: Video certe [...] .“

18 *Ibid.*, (h XIII, 5) 1,5: „Quid enim responderes, si quis te «quid est aliud? interrogaret? Nonne diceres: «non aliud quam aliud? Sic, «quid caelum?, responderes: «non aliud quam caelum.“

limits the defined in relation to everything else and does so in a negative way.¹⁹ Through this, one can defend, on the one hand, Cusanus' valuation that the definition, although it takes everything in account by denying it and therefore remains abstract, without giving any concrete qualification of other beings,²⁰ is most precise and most true. On the other hand, it is right that in the self-definition of *non aliud* — '*non aliud est non aliud quam non aliud*' —, neither in Latin nor in any translation do we find a complete equality of the three instances from a grammatical point of view, because the first and the third are mostly used as nominalizations, while the second takes the (original) role of denying the otherness.²¹ Despite the objections I have mentioned, one can plausibly assume that the structure of *non aliud quam* has an all-encompassing significance, if we take into account the general level at which it defines negatively everything that there is. It is this characteristic of being all-encompassing that Cusanus makes use of in his search for a concept of the absolute.

A Concept of God?

Fernando takes up the reference to Dionysius Areopagita and underlines that *non aliud* has to be understood as the concept of God, because Fernando identifies it with 'the first beginning' or simply the 'first.' Qualifying something as 'first' brings already with it a reference to something second, that is dependent on the first. Concerning the originated (*principiatum*), it is said that it has from the beginning whatever it is. The beginning (*principium*), however, is the ground of being, or the definition, of what is originated.²² Of course, the identification of *ratio essendi* and *definitio*, which we can observe in this place, also elucidates the foregoing reflection on *non aliud* as the one that defines itself and everything else.²³ Up to now, the *definitio* has been

19 Cf. Dirk Cürsgen, *Die Logik der Unendlichkeit: Die Philosophie des Absoluten im Spätwerk des Nikolaus von Kues* (Lang, 2007), 96.

20 Cf. Stephan Grotz, *Negationen des Absoluten: Meister Eckhart, Cusanus, Hegel* (Meiner, 2009), 214.

21 Cf. Thomas Leinkauf, *Nicolaus Cusanus: Eine Einführung* (Aschendorff, 2006), 138.

22 Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *De non aliud* (h XIII, 5) 2,6: „Principiatum vero cum a se nihil, sed, quidquid est, habeat a principio, profecto principium est ratio essendi eius seu definitio.“

23 The order of the assertion used here corresponds to the logical order, beginning with the definition of itself, as Cusanus does in *ibid.*, (h XIII, 61), propositio I (n. 114): „Definitio, quae se et omnia definit, ea est, quae per omnem mentem quaeritur“, and also in Nicholas of Cusa, *De venatione sapientiae*, (h XII, 39) 14,40. At the beginning of *De non aliud*, however, one starts, for didactical reasons, with the definition of all beings. From this definition, one gets

interpreted somehow as essential definition; it is therefore the cause of the defined being what it is. If it also serves as *ratio essendi*, then it endows the so-and-so defined with existence, too. This reminds us of both the logical *and* the ontological level of *definitio* underlined at the beginning.

If we remember that *non aliud* defines both everything else and itself, then it must not only define itself, but also sustain itself; *non aliud* would be, therefore, *ratio essendi sui ipsius* as well. We can find some quotations of different works of Cusanus that allow for this conclusion. In *De docta ignorantia*, e.g., taking up the foregoing reflections, we read that “nothing exists from itself except the unqualifiedly Maximum (in which from itself, in itself, through itself, and with respect to itself are the same thing: viz., Absolute Being) and that, necessarily, every existing thing is that which it is, insofar as it is, from Absolute Being.”²⁴ In the later *De principio*, the author argues that the beginning (*principium*) must be conceived as existing *per se*, because otherwise one could not think of anything else that is grounded, with regard to existence, in this beginning.²⁵

Fernando, with the explicit consent of Nicholas, has identified *non aliud* with the ‘first beginning’ and the ‘first’. By doing so, he has somehow declared *non aliud* to be a concept of God. Nicholas, however, formulates a caveat: *non aliud* is, in any case, not the (unnameable) name of God, which is before any nameable name, but it is rather similar to the way to reach this name.²⁶ Like other titles for the divine, *non aliud* has the value of a symbol (*aenigma*). It helps in the knowledge of the divine, but it does not properly denote it. Among the symbols hitherto developed though, it has an excellent position,

the conclusion that *non aliud* also defines itself. Cf. Erwin Sonderegger, “Cusanus: Definitio als Selbstbestimmung”, *Bochumer Philosophisches Jahrbuch für Antike und Mittelalter* 4 (1999): 163.

24 Nicholas of Cusa, *De docta ignorantia* II (h I, 65) 2,98: „Docuit nos sacra ignorantia in prioribus nihil a se esse nisi maximum simpliciter, ubi a se, in se, per se et ad se idem sunt: ipsum scilicet absolutum esse [...]“

25 Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *Tu quis es <De principio>* (h X/2b, 23f.), n. 18: „Principium enim, cum non sit ab alio, per se subsistere dicimus, cum nihil esse concipere valeamus, si ipsum non conciperemus esse [...]“

26 Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *De non aliud* (h XIII, 6) 2,7: „Cum nos autem alter alteri suam non possimus revelare visionem nisi per vocabulorum significatum, praecisius utique li ‚non aliud‘ non occurrit, licet non sit nomen Dei, quod est ante omne nomen in caelo et terra nominabile, sicut via peregrinantem ad civitatem dirigens non est nomen civitatis.“ Similarly *ibid.*, (h XIII, 52) 2,99.

as it portrays quite closely the unnameable name of God, more closely (*propinquius*) than others.²⁷

Now, Cusanus puts *non aliud* clearly in relation to the 'other' (*aliud*). It precedes the 'other' from a logical point of view, as it is its beginning (*principium*) with regard to being and knowing. Cusanus uses the metaphor of light and the analogy of proportion to elucidate the way in which *non aliud* is the beginning of perception:

[...] perceptual light is in some way conceived to be related to perceptual seeing as the Light which is Not-other [is related] to all the things which can be mentally seen.²⁸

Perceptual light is the condition for our ability to see something perceptually. Nicholas explains that we can see a specific colour, because the perceptual light is delimited or defined. Out of this knowledge, founded in experience and even convertible into the modern scientific explanation of vision, he concludes that perceptual light is the beginning of the being and knowing of the perceptually visible.²⁹ One can surely follow this conclusion with regard to knowing, but it might be surprising in relation to being — at least if we do not restrict the argument of 'being' to 'visible existence.' Quickly, Cusanus steps onto the factual plane where God is presented as the light that precedes everything else. Concerning this 'light', which is identified with *non aliud*, he wants to state that it is the beginning in relation to the being and knowing of the other.

God or *non aliud* as unnameable light stands in relation also to the perceptual light we have mentioned; he shines in it (*lucet*). What is stated here could be explicated in the language of participation. By the mediation of the visible light — and in the case of mental knowledge by the mediation of the created spirit –, *non aliud* gives being and knowing, as Nicholas further explains: Concerning what exists and what is known/seen, it is beginning (*principium*) and therefore the beginning, the middle, and the end. Whatever something is, it receives this from *non aliud*.³⁰ In the same way, one can hold

27 Cf. *ibid.*, (h XIII, 6) 2,7. This appraisal of *non aliud* will lose a bit of its value two years later, when, in *De apice theoriae* (1464), Cusanus similarly characterizes the excellence of *posse*.

28 *Ibid.*, (h XIII, 7) 3,8: „Sed sensibilis lux visui comparata sensibili ita sese habere aliquid concipitur, sicut lux, quae ‚non aliud‘, ad omnia quae mente videri queunt.“

29 Cf. *ibid.*: „[...] ita sensibilis lux principium est essendi et visibile sensibile cognoscendi.“

30 Cf. *ibid.*, (h XIII, 7f.) 3,9f.: „Ceterum quia ad aliud, quod videre cupis audireve, est intentio, in principii consideratione non defigeris, quamquam id principium, medium et finis est

that through the mediation of *non aliud*, which remains in itself hidden, the finite being can be known as what it is.³¹

An Apophatic Account

Through what follows, Cusanus reminds his readers of the special status of God. In order not to fail from the very first step in searching for the beginning, Nicholas suggests something else to his conversation partners: One must not, in any case, search for the beginning as for some being, something 'other,'³² as for something that stands for itself and might be delimited from the other. He uses once more the analogy of light in order to formulate a criterion for the adequate approximation of the *non aliud*: "Therefore light is sought in what-is-visible, where it is perceived; thus, in this way it is seen at least gropingly."³³ That means that *non aliud* is concomitantly known in the knowledge of the other (*aliud*) and is thus approximately accessible.

Nicholas does not do justice to the desire uttered by Fernando that *non aliud* be described in greater detail. To be more precise, he does not feel able to do so, because otherwise he would have to delimit *non aliud* from the other and thus make it something 'other' as well. In order to defend his standpoint, he refers to the tradition of apophatic theology. Without naming him, he quotes statements typical of Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita — that God is super-substantial and above every name.³⁴ Although these claims seem to be

quaesiti. Eodem modo in ‚non aliud‘ adverte. Nam cum omne, quod quidem est, sit non aliud quam idipsum, hoc utique non habet aliunde; a ‚non alio‘ igitur habet. Non igitur aut est aut cognoscitur esse id, quod est, nisi per ‚non aliud‘, quae quidem est eius causa, adaequatissima ratio scilicet sive definitio [...].“

31 This is correctly emphasized by Pál Bolberitz, *Philosophischer Gottesbegriff bei Nikolaus Cusanus in seinem Werk: ‚De non aliud‘* (Benno, 1989), 43.

32 Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *De non aliud* (h XIII, 8) 3,10: „[...] nequaquam iuxta esse consideratur, quando quidem id, quod quaeritur, quaeratur ut aliud.“

33 *Ibid.*: „Lux igitur in visibili, ubi percipiatur, exquiritur, ut sic saltem attrahabiliter videatur.“

34 Cf. *ibid.*, (h XIII, 8) 4,11: „Omnes enim theologi Deum viderunt quid maius esse quam concipi posset, et idcirco ‚supersubstantialem‘, ‚supra omne nomen‘ et consimilia de ipso affirmarunt [...].“ The editors refer with regard to ‚supersubstantialis‘ (ὑπερουσίος) to Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De divinis nominibus* I 1.2.6; V 2 and *De Mystica Theologia* III, with regard to ‚supra omne nomen‘ (ὑπερώνυμος) to *De divinis nominibus* I 5.7 and *De Mystica Theologia* V; cf. Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *Corpus Dionysiacum: Vol. 1: De divinis nominibus*, ed. Beate R. Suchla (de Gruyter, 1990), 108; 110; 116-20, and Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *Corpus Dionysiacum*, Vol. 2, 146; 149f. Furthermore there is given the more fundamental reference to

negative and induce people to speak of negative theology, Nicholas underlines that *non aliud* is neither affirmation nor negation but prior to both. It is important to see how the author relates it to his path followed in earlier works: *Non aliud* “is that which for many years I sought by way of the coincidence of opposites — as the many books which I have written about this speculative matter bear witness.”³⁵

The formulation, as it stands, reminds us to distinguish between *coincidentia oppositorum* and *non aliud*. The former is the medium to reach what is now called *non aliud*. This distinction is already somehow included in *De docta ignorantia*, but not always rigorously followed. In his later works, then, Cusanus makes clear that God is to be individuated beyond the *coincidentia oppositorum*.³⁶ Nevertheless only some moments ago, I mentioned that *non aliud* cannot simply be identified with God either; it is only an excellent way to know the beginning (*principium*) and portrays closely the unnameable name of God.³⁷ The passages under examination have left open the question whether *non aliud* denotes the absolute himself or whether it is ‘only’ the path towards the absolute.

In consonance with the example of Dionysius Areopagita, especially from the fifth chapter of his *Mystica Theologia*, the conversation denies one property after another of *non aliud*, including those attributes that are classically ascribed to God or identified with his essence, like ‘eternal’ or the transcendentals *unum, ens, verum, bonum*. According to Nicholas, they all come close to *non aliud*, but they are still something ‘other’ in relation to it; therefore, they are denied. One can use them as names for the divine, but they lack the precision³⁸ which is obviously only proper to *non aliud*. The conversation partners even distance themselves from identifying the divine with the One (*unum*), as it is done in Plato’s *Parmenides* and, by Dionysius, in *De divinis*

the New Testament’s *Letter to Philippians* 2,9: “[...] God raised him high, and gave him the name which is above all other names (τὸ ὄνομα τὸ ὑπὲρ πάντων ὀνομα) [...]”

35 Nicholas of Cusa, *De non aliud* (h XIII, 9) 4,12: „[...] sed ante omnia talia; et istud est, quod per oppositorum coincidentiam annis multis quaesivi, ut libelli multi, quos de hac speculatione conscripsi, ostendunt.“

36 Cf. the quotations given by Mariano Álvarez-Gómez, *Die verborgene Gegenwart des Unendlichen bei Nikolaus von Kues* (Pustet, 1968), 48–60. To what extent the concept of *coincidentia* is widened to *non aliud*, is discussed by Grotz, *Negationen des Absoluten*, 164.

37 Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *De non aliud* (h XIII, 6) 2,7 (see footnote 26).

38 Cf. *ibid.*, (h XIII, 10) 4,14: „Sumuntur quoque ob id omnia haec pro apertis Dei nominibus, tametsi praecisionem non attingant.“

nominibus. We get the impression that it is intended to locate the divine beyond all concepts and points of access. Cusanus does so because he wants to avoid every temptation to conceive God in the way of a finite being. So he is also sceptical with regard to the doctrine of the transcendentals. That classically one also counts ‘something’ (*aliquid*) as among the transcendentals might have also contributed to all this. Of course, *aliquid*, explained as *aliud quid*, is not applicable at all in the description of *non aliud*.³⁹

A Grounding Relation to ‘aliud’

Going forward in *De non aliud*, Fernando individuates the consequences of what has been said so far; that means he explicates what is implied in the description of *non aliud* as the one that defines itself and everything else. In any case, he contemplates everything that can be seen within *non aliud*; nothing can be or be known apart from it.⁴⁰ According to him (and Nicholas will approve it soon), this is valid also for the negations of being and knowledge, nothing and ignorance:

For everything which exists exists insofar as it is not other [than itself]. And everything which is understood is understood insofar as it is understood to be not other [than itself]. And everything which is seen to be true is seen to be true insofar as it is discerned as not other [than true]. And, in sum, whatever is seen to be an other is seen to be an other insofar as it is not other [than it is].⁴¹

This sums up, what has been conceived before and in other writings under the concepts of *ratio essendi et cognoscendi* or *entitas absoluta*. In the same sense, *non aliud* is now characterized, in relation to the ‘other’, as the most adequate constituting ground and as the standard and measure of everything; so it defines that something *is* and *how* it is, whether it be possible or actual,

39 Cf. Jan B. Elpert, “Unitas — Aequalitas — Nexus: Eine textkommentierende Lektüre zu ‚De venatione sapientiae‘ (Kap. XXI-XXVI)”, in *Nikolaus von Kues: De venatione sapientiae: Akten des Symposions in Trier vom 23. bis 25. Oktober 2008*, ed. Walter A. Euler (Paulinus, 2010), 175.

40 Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *De non aliud* (h XIII, 11) 5,15: „Non aliud seorsum ante omne aliud intuens ipsum sic video, quod in eo quidquid videri potest intueor; nam neque esse nec cognosci extra ipsum quidquam possibile [...]“

41 *Ibid.*: „Omne enim, quod est, in tantum est, in quantum ‚non aliud‘ est; et omne, quod intelligitur, in tantum intelligitur, in quantum ‚non aliud‘ esse intelligitur; et omne, quod videtur verum, usque adeo videtur verum, in quantum ‚non aliud‘ cernitur. Et summatim quidquid videtur aliud, in tantum aliud videtur, in quantum ‚non aliud‘.“ For what follows cf. *ibid.*, (h XIII, 11) 5,16.

moving or non-moving, living or understanding. Giving his assent to Fernando's speech, Nicholas states:

You have rightly directed your acute [mental] gaze toward God (who is signified through "Not-other"), so that in this Beginning, Cause, or Constituting Ground, which is neither other nor diverse, you have seen — to the extent presently granted you — all the things which are humanly visible.⁴²

By doing so, he emphasizes the instrumental interpretation of *non aliud*. It is not clear, however, in which relation stand the concepts *principium*, *causa* and *ratio*. On the basis of what has been said earlier, one might suppose that God himself accomplishes the functions indicated by these concepts. But immediately after the passage I have quoted, *non aliud* is called *rerum ratio*. That means that one of the concepts presumably to be referred to God is applied to *non aliud* itself:

You are granted [this vision] to the extent that Not-other — i.e., the Constituting Ground of things — reveals itself, or makes itself visible, to your reason [ratio] or mind.⁴³

In this same sentence, we note that the neutral expression *non aliud* is followed by a personal form of the adjective (*visibilem*), which contains a grammatical error. As the sentence goes on, we are confronted with a further difficulty. We do not explicitly get any new subject, and *non aliud* is given a mediating function. Cusanus says that by means of it, as it defines itself, something or someone has shown itself or himself more clearly than before.⁴⁴ If we refer to the preceding phrase *ipsum non aliud* as the sentence's subject, it sounds a bit strange; *non aliud* would reveal itself more clearly than before, and all this by means of itself. In his English translation, Hopkins suggests that God is to be taken as subject; so the claim would say that through *non aliud* — by means of the fact that it defines itself — God now has revealed himself more clearly than before. This sounds at least plausible, but why does then Cusanus not tell us explicitly that he wants to be understood in this way? As a solution,

42 *Ibid.*, (h XIII, 11) 5,17: „Recte in Deum aciem iecisti per ‚non aliud‘ significatum, ut in principio, causa seu ratione, quae non est alia nec diversa, cuncta humaniter visibilia conspiceres [...]“

43 *Ibid.*: „Tantum autem conceditur, quantum ipsum ‚non aliud‘, scilicet rerum ratio, tuae se rationi seu menti revelat sive visibilem exhibet [...]“

44 Cf. *ibid.*: „[...] sed hoc nunc medio per ‚non aliud‘, quia sese definit, revelavit clarius quam antea.“

I propose that Cusanus writes *non aliud*, but thinks of *deus*, God, and that he betrays himself by using the adjective's personal form. The following sentence would then indicate the explicit passage from *non aliud* to *deus*:

But in this symbolism of the signification of "Not-other" — chiefly by way of the consideration that it defines itself — [God has] now [revealed Himself] more richly and more clearly. [He has revealed Himself] to such an extent that I can hope that He will some day reveal Himself to us without a symbolism.⁴⁵

The ambiguity between God and *non aliud* allows for the alternative interpretations that either Cusanus himself was not sure whether both collapse into one or that he explicitly wanted to keep his readers in this lack of evidence — in order to prevent them from fixing the divine into one concept and to appreciate the special value of *non aliud* which lets us get as near to God as possible and offers rich possibilities for speculation as no other symbolism does. The different interpretations, offered by scholars,⁴⁶ agree at least on this ambiguity: the term *non aliud* names in a really adequate manner the divine, and the latter reveals itself in this term without allowing itself to be caught in it.

Cusanus reminds us of the contrasting descriptions of *non aliud* and *aliud*. He especially underlines the complete independency of *non aliud*, while everything else depends on it. It does not lack anything, nor can anything exist outside of it.⁴⁷ That nothing can exist outside of *non aliud* entails that everything must either be identical to it or exist within it. That *non aliud* 'is' somehow the *aliud*, can be seen in the author's elucidations, but it is not a bare identity. For this reason, we had better start from the interpretation of 'immanence.' Obviously, we do not need to conceive it in a spatial manner; Cusanus rather hints at a conditional relation. It is explained in terms of *non*

45 *Ibid.*, (h XIII, 12) 5,17: „[...] nunc autem in hoc aenigmate significati ipsius ‚non aliud‘ per rationem potissimum illam, quia se definit, fecundius et clarius, adeo ut sperare queam ipsum Deum sese nobis aliquando sine aenigmate revelaturum.“ As everywhere, the text quoted above reports the translation by Hopkins, including his clarifying amplifications in brackets that correspond, however, to the interpretation defended here.

46 Cf. Bolberitz, *Philosophischer Gottesbegriff bei Nikolaus Cusanus*, 61–64; Cürsger, *Die Logik der Unendlichkeit*, 92, 97; Rohstock, *Der negative Selbstbezug des Absoluten*, 112f.; Ekkehard Fräntzki, *Nikolaus von Kues und das Problem der absoluten Subjektivität* (Hain, 1972), 111–24.

47 Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *De non aliud* (h XIII, 13) 6,20: „‚Non aliud‘ autem, quia a nullo aliud est, non caret aliquo, nec extra ipsum quidquam esse potest.“

aliud's being within the *aliud*, however, as *aliud*. To illustrate this idea, Cusanus describes the relation between God and the sky he has created:

Accordingly, in itself Not-other is seen antecedently and as absolutely not other than itself; and in an other it is seen as not other than this other. For example, I might say that God is none of the visible things, since He is their cause and creator. And I might say that in the sky He is not other than the sky. For how would the sky be not other than the sky if in it Not-other were other than sky?⁴⁸

So, the immanence of *non aliud* (or God) in the finite does not add anything to the latter which it would otherwise lack, but it makes the finite be totally itself. Especially if the understanding of the definition in question — “X is not-other than X” — follows the logic of conceptualizing, immanence consists in everything's being not-other/*non aliud* with regard to itself.⁴⁹ If we want to adopt a theological interpretation, we are invited to remember claims pertaining to the Absolute as being the *entitas* or *quidditas* of all there is. Yet, Cusanus does not tell us how to understand concretely that *non aliud* makes every finite entity to be just what it is. Nevertheless, the grounding role of *non aliud* for the finite has to be distinguished from the fact that every entity is different from anything other. The otherness, which is entailed, cannot be the effect of *non aliud*. For this claim, I refer to the following explication, which directs us further:

Now, since the sky is other than not-sky, it is an other. But God, who is Not-other, is not the sky, which is an other; nonetheless, in the sky God is not an other; nor is He other than sky.⁵⁰

This means that God is sky, insofar as the sky is the sky itself, and he is not sky, insofar as the sky is different to all that is not sky. If the latter were the case, then God himself would be other and would have lost his quality of being *non aliud*. Nicholas sums up with a hint to those theologians who have

48 *Ibid.*, (h XIII, 14) 6,20: „[...] tunc ipsum in se antecedenter et absolute non aliud quam ipsum videtur et in alio cernitur non aliud quam ipsum aliud; puta si dixerò Deum nihil visibilium esse, quoniam eorum causa est et creator, et [si, suggested by the *Codex Toletanus*] dixerò ipsum in caelo esse non aliud quam caelum; quomodo enim caelum non aliud quam caelum foret, si ‚non aliud‘ in ipso foret aliud quam caelum?“

49 In this way I interpret Cürsger, *Die Logik der Unendlichkeit*, 105.

50 Nicholas of Cusa, *De non aliud* (h XIII, 14) 6,20: „Caelum autem cum a non-caelo aliud sit, idcirco aliud est; Deus vero, qui ‚non aliud‘ est, non est caelum, quod aliud, licet nec in ipso sit aliud, nec ab ipso aliud [...]“

claimed that God is all things in all things, while being at the same time none of them.⁵¹

Only briefly does Nicholas speak about how to conceive creation within this conception: *Non aliud* does not fall back upon something other in order to bring forward the ‘other,’ but it creates, for example, the sky “through the sky which in Not-other is Not-other.”⁵² As he has already done in the *Triologus de possesset*, Cusanus clearly rebuts the idea of any first matter that stands for itself. He rather integrates the potentiality of the created into *non aliud*. He continues to repeat what he has said in an even more ‘Platonic’ way:

[...] we might speak of Not-other as intellectual spirit — or as intellectual light — and might consider that, in the intellect, it is the Constituting Ground of all things [intellectual].) For the Constituting Ground of the sky’s being the sky and not any other thing is antecedently in Not-other. Through this Constituting Ground [the sky] is constituted as the sky; and in the sky this Constituting Ground is sky.⁵³

The definition — here the constituting ground (*ratio*) — of the created is implicated within *non aliud*. Using a Dionysius-like language, Cusanus describes it as being prior to every name, as being all in all names and yet none of all these names.⁵⁴ In this manner he intimates that in the supreme unity the names are not differentiated among each other. This as well is in consonance with the classical doctrine of God’s perfect simplicity, as we can notice in Cusanus’ attempt to formulate it in a positive way. He concludes: “Therefore, I

51 Based on the phrase of the New Testament’s *First Letter to the Corinthians* 15,28: “[...] so that God may be all in all (ἵνα ἢ ὁ θεὸς [τὰ] πάντα ἐν πᾶσιν)”; Cusanus states e.g. in Nicholas of Cusa, *Triologus de possesset* (h XI/2, 14), n. 12: „Sed dum est omnia in omnibus, sic est omnia quod non plus unum quam aliud, quoniam non est sic unum quod non aliud.“ The formula of *omnia in omnibus* is also used by Dionysius Areopagita. For more formulations of the same kind see Klaus Kremer, “Gott — in allem alles, in nichts nichts: Bedeutung und Herkunft dieser Lehre des Nikolaus von Kues”, in *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft* 17, ed. Rudolf Haubst (Grünewald, 1986), 188–91.

52 Nicholas of Cusa, *De non aliud* (h XIII, 14) 6,22: „[...] non enim creat caelum ex alio, sed per caelum, quod in ipso ipsum est [...]“

53 *Ibid.*: „[...] sicut si ipsum intellectualem spiritum diceremus seu lucem et in ipso intellectu rationem omnium esse ipsum considerarem; tunc enim ratio, cur caelum caelum et non aliud prioriter in ipso est, per quam constitutum est caelum, sive quae in caelo est caelum.“

54 Cf. *ibid.*, (h XIII, 15) 6,22: „[...] quod vides ante nomen, quia omnia in omnibus est nominibus et omnium nullum.“

view the Unnameable not as deprived of [every] name but as prior to [every] name.⁵⁵

IV. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Within the movement of neoclassical theism, the figure of Nicholas Cusanus has found some interest. However, a deeper investigation of how he might contribute to the development of a valuable concept of God has not yet been undertaken. According to Daniel Dombrowski, Cusanus came close to the position of neoclassical theism that both God and world have necessary as well as contingent aspects.⁵⁶ Roland Faber, in presenting process theology to a German-speaking audience, explicitly refers to Nicholas Cusanus and his concept of *non aliud*, but without going further in developing the question.⁵⁷ For Philip Clayton as well, *non aliud* is somehow in the background.⁵⁸ Some others give a hint in the direction of Cusanus' idea of the *coincidentia oppositorum*.⁵⁹ In general, only thinkers familiar with the European continental tradition of philosophy have said that Cusanus might be an interesting dialogue partner in the philosophical theology of contemporary times. But the aforementioned authors themselves do not really exploit the speculative resources of Cusanus and his concepts of God.

So, to what extent does his conception adhere to the advantages of the classical tradition on the one hand, and how does it support, on the other hand, the requests of neoclassical theism for a renewed concept of God?

As, differently e.g. to Thomas Aquinas, famous for his great *Summae*, Cusanus has not written any systematic theological treatise, we do not always

55 *Ibid.*: „Non video igitur innominabilem quasi nomine privatum, verum ante nomen.“

56 Daniel A. Dombrowski, *Analytic Theism, Hartshorne, and the Concept of God* (State Univ. of New York Press, 1996), 9.

57 Cf. Roland Faber, *Gott als Poet der Welt: Anliegen und Perspektiven der Prozesstheologie* (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2003), 248.

58 Cf. Philip Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit*, ed. by Zachary Simpson (Fortress, 2008), 151, note 38. Elsewhere, Clayton shows to be familiar with Cusanus's thought in general, see e.g. Philip Clayton, *Das Gottesproblem: Gott und Unendlichkeit in der neuzeitlichen Philosophie* (Schöningh, 1996), 135–38. See also the 3rd chapter (“Enfolding and Unfolding God: Cusanic *Complicatio*”, 87–123) of Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (Columbia Univ. Press, 2015).

59 Cf. John Macquarrie, *In Search of Deity* (Crossroad, 1985), 98–110; Ernest L. Simmons, *The Entangled Trinity: Quantum Physics and Theology* (Fortress, 2014), 149.

see how he stays within the central stances of classical theism. He certainly does not distance himself from God's being simple, eternal, immutable, and impassible, and furthermore, also not from his being omniscient, omnipotent and fully good, as neoclassical theists usually maintain. We have seen how he rather relativizes classical divine attributes in order not to substantialize God nor to describe him as an entity among others. Concerning the concept of potency, there are indications, in other works I have not analysed here, that Cusanus does not simply take over the idea of *actus purus*, but that he integrates active and, in some manner, also passive potentiality into the absolute. He is able to do so because he conceives the absolute as an all-encompassing reality, as neoclassical theists like to claim. This can also be seen on the grounds of the concept of *non aliud*, introduced as the definition of — or the process of defining — itself and everything else.

Cusanus underlines the absoluteness of God — 'the first', as he calls him. Nothing finite can add anything to his/its perfection. The idea of divine receptivity, central according to neoclassical theists as, e.g., Charles Hartshorne,⁶⁰ is not explicated in Cusanus' work. He insists that God is the (exclusive) ground for his being (*ratio essendi sui ipsius*). Unlike neoclassical theists, he stands fast with God's aseity. Although he strictly holds to the distinction between absolute and finite, he is able to think of an intimate link between the two. Or should we rather state that he is able to conceive such an intimate link just *because* he distinguishes them so strictly, as he does? We arrive at a conception where the absolute, as *non aliud*, is transcendent to everything finite that is to be characterized as *aliud*. Equally, *non aliud* is totally immanent to every finite being: God is present in the sky (or 'is' the sky), to take up Cusanus' example, just by the sky's being not-other than the sky.

The author is, of course, aware of the possible misinterpretation that God seems to be identical to the universe of finite beings. In later passages of *De non aliud*, not considered here, he declares that God's overall presence, his total immanence, does not entail that he cannot be distinguished from the totality of being.⁶¹ It is, on the contrary, possible to defend Cusanus against

60 Cf. Charles Hartshorne, *Man's Vision of God and the Logic of Theism* (Harper and Brothers, 1941), 330.

61 See especially Nicholas of Cusa, *De non aliud* (h XIII, 26) 12,47: „[...] cum omnia ad Deum seu ‚non aliud‘ ordinentur et nequaquam ad aliud post ipsum, non est considerandum universum quasi finis universorum; tunc enim Deus esset universum. Sed cum ad suum sint

the accusation of a pantheist account. Based on what has been said, there are good reasons to classify Cusanus as a panentheist thinker — if one likes to use this (somehow controversial, but nevertheless common) label.

Within a rather classical framework, Cusanus presents us with a kind of theism that allows for doing justice not to all, but at least to many important requests of neoclassical theism. At the same time, he is able to describe God as both self-referential and grounding other entities' being without damaging God's absoluteness. Cusanus protects us from the need to 'downgrade' God in order to conceive him as intimately linked to the finite. Here I see the value of his contribution, centred on the concept of *non aliud*. The idea of conceiving God as somehow personal is, as in other classical authors, at most in the background, but it is certainly not part of the author's interest in writing *De non aliud*.⁶²

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principium ordinata universa — per ordinem enim a Deo universa esse se ostendunt — ad ipsum igitur ut ordinis in omnibus ordinem sunt ordinata; omnia enim ordinat, ut ipsum ‚non aliud‘ sive ordinis ordo in ordinatorum ad ipsum perfectione perfectius relucescat.“

62 My thanks to Father Daniel Jamros S.J. for useful linguistic comments to this paper.

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