

# The Lives of Alberti and Cusanus and Their Shared Objective

## Deciphering the Empirical World

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### Introduction

In the 1450's Nicolaus Cusanus witnessed firsthand the developments in the arts of architecture, engineering, painting, and sculpture in Italy. Those same developments had been written about and commented upon by Leon Battisti Alberti, and those writings were in turn read by Cusanus. After Eberhard Hempel discussed Cusanus' theological relationship with concepts in contemporary fine art, Giovanni Santinello inquired about art-related themes and aesthetics in Cusanus' writings and about the intellectual relationship between Alberti and Cusanus. Since the 1990's these topics have been revisited by scholars. Ideas such as vision, perspective, number, measurement, cartography, mirror, and self-portrait are themes discussed in relation to the writings of the two men. This paper casts a wider net regarding their relationships within their personal and cultural contexts in order to better understand how much they had in common in life, and then discusses their core objective of an investigation of the temporal world that leaves aside any discussions of the quiddities of beings. Alberti pursued this notion throughout his life, while Cusanus reached it only at the end of his own.

## I. Parallel Paths

Cusanus (1401–1464) and Alberti (1404–1472) trained in canon law; Cusanus in Padua and Alberti in Bologna. Both lived in Padua as »foreigners«; Cusanus as a part of the German intellectual community (1417–1423); Alberti as a son of an exiled Florentine family studying at Gasparino da Barzizza's school, where he received a humanist education (1415–1421). Although they were in Padua at the same time, Alberti would have been yet too immature to discuss philosophical issues with Cusanus. Alberti left the city for Bologna in 1421 and in 1428 received a doctorate in canon law from the University of Bologna. Cusanus received his doctorate in canon law in 1423; and in 1424 he traveled to Rome in an unsuccessful attempt to find an ecclesiastical position.

Both men launched their careers by »finding« ancient secular literature. To that end, twenty-year old Alberti, partially out of boredom with studying law, wrote a Latin comedy entitled *Philodoxus* (love of glory), claiming it to be a genuine work of a fictitious Roman playwright named »Lepidus« (»witty« in Latin).<sup>1</sup> In 1425 Cusanus, by chance, found in the cathedral archives in Cologne the twelve lost plays of the Roman comic poet Plautus (250–164 B.C.). He shrewdly concealed his findings and used the manuscripts, according to Meuthen, to gain benefices from the Papacy.<sup>2</sup> Both men became priests; in Alberti's case, probably to support his living. Coming from merchant families, both were outside the princely membership of the Curia, usually composed of aristocratic descendants. Unlike other wealthy members, neither of them had financial support from his family. Alberti was born out of wedlock and needed special sanction by Pope Eugenius IV to become a priest. Not always welcomed by the legitimate side of his family, he was almost assassinated by a relative (ca. 1430) because of inheritance issues. His illegitimacy was probably a high hurdle for his advancement in the Curia where throughout his life he worked as papal abbreviator – a technical and important position but not an impressive one. Reform-minded Cusanus was ridiculed

1 This is one of his autobiographical allegories and could have been inspired by Petrararch's comedy *Philologia* (no longer extant).

2 ERICH MEUTHEN, Nikolaus von Kues 1401–1464: Skizze einer Biographie, Münster 1964 (reprinted 1976), 31 (English translation: GERALD CHRISTIANSON and DAVID CROWNER, Nicholas of Cusa: A Sketch for a Biography, Washington, D. C. 2010, 34).

by his princely colleagues in the Curia for his seriousness, stubbornness, and his wretched appearance. Throughout their lives, both men knew well, and bitterly, what it meant to be at the mercy of the Goddess of Fortuna.

Cusanus and Alberti lived at a time of rapid technological advances in astronomy, engineering, and art. Alberti recorded techniques invented by engineers and artists, interpreting them through his in-depth antiquarian knowledge of ancient secular writers such as Vitruvius, Strabo, and Ptolemy. He was inspired by Vitruvius in writing *De re aedificatoria* (1440s–1472). Cusanus quoted Vitruvius at least three times in his own writings.

As in Renaissance society in general, strong social and intellectual hierarchies ordered professions. Engineers, stonemasons, and craftsmen were at the bottom of this structure. In Alberti's view, however, every craft possessed secrets in its concepts and techniques that were part of a more general mathematical truth governing the world – a truth which he was anxious to decipher. In the 1430's, Alberti looked beyond the hierarchies and wrote about those secrets. In his autobiography written ca. 1437/38, Alberti describes himself as follows:

»When he heard that some learned person had arrived, he at once tried to get to know him and to learn from whoever it might be anything that he did not know. From craftsmen, architects, shipbuilders, and even from cobblers and tailors, he tried to learn, wishing to acquire any rare and secret knowledge contained in their particular arts. And such knowledge he at once gladly shared with those of his fellow citizens who were interested. He often pretended ignorance of things in order to better examine the mind, the values, and the knowledge of another.«<sup>3</sup>

Cusanus, on the other hand, was not yet keen to break barriers, starting to do so only after following Alberti's example in 1450 when those highly skilled tradesmen became sources of inspiration for Cusanus' *idiota* in 1450.

It is unlikely that Alberti and Cusanus would have met before the Ferrara-Florence Council in 1438–1439, at which time Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli (1397–1482), a mutual friend, working for the Florentine Signoria as judicial astrologer,<sup>4</sup> could have easily introduced them. Cusanus had first met Toscanelli in Padua at the lectures of Beldomandi, the

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3 RENÉE NEU WATKINS, *The Life of Leon Battista Alberti*, by himself, in: *Italian Quarterly*, XXX, 17 (Summer 1989) 10.

4 JOHN RIGBY HALE, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Italian Renaissance*, London 1981 (reprinted 1992), 317.

newly appointed professor of music and astrology at the University of Padua, in the early 1420s. Alberti, on the other hand, probably first met Toscanelli in Florence in 1428, when his family's exile for political reasons was annulled and he visited the city for the first time. In the next year, Alberti dedicated his *Intercoenales* (*Dinner Pieces*, 1429-earlier version), which were to be read »over dinner« (*inter cenas*) to satisfy the minds of guests, to Toscanelli and sought his comments.<sup>5</sup>

## II. Some Themes in Alberti's Early Writings Recurring in Cusanus' Works in the 1450s

Since his youth, Alberti had had an ability to discuss profound ideas succinctly. In doing so, he often avoided direct theological references, remaining in the sensory-imaginative realm, intentionally avoiding metaphysics. Cusanus' metaphysical writings on the other hand were often convoluted and lengthy. From very early in their scholarly lives, Alberti and Cusanus were writing from almost opposite temperamental viewpoints. However, students of Cusanus found concepts which would later become central to Cusanus' dialectic in Alberti's early writings.

Because it is an enumeration of so many of his core beliefs, one of Alberti's more interesting early stories is one entitled »Anuli« (Rings). An allegory about the artist and creation, the story is quasi autobiographical in that it's protagonist, a young man unhappy with his station and prospects in life, approaches the Goddesses of Hope and of Counsel for

5 ANTHONY GRAFTON, Leon Battista Alberti: Master Builder of the Italian Renaissance, New York, 2000, 64. Another important mutual friend, Giovanni Andrea Bussi came onto the scene in the late 1450s and worked as Cusanus's personal secretary. See MEUTHEN, *Skizze* (see note 2) 127, 131, and 132. In the 1460s (1464?), when publishing his *De statua* (1434), Alberti gave a copy of it to Bussi, dedicating it to him, who was working on introducing printing techniques to Italy and became editorial adviser to Sweynheym and Pannartz in 1468. See GRAFTON, Alberti, 336. In terms of the letter sent with the copy, see GIOVANNI SANTINELLO, Leon Battista Alberti: Una visione estetica del mondo e della vita, Florence 1962, 266–267. Toscanelli brought to Florence a copy of Biagio Pelicani's *Questiones perspectivae* (ca. 1390). Toscanelli is believed to be the author of *Della prospettiva* (housed in the Medici-Riccardi Library), which might have influenced Alberti's *De pictura* (1435). See KARSTEN HARRIES, *Infinity and Perspective*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2001, 68.

guidance. They advise him to create a series of rings to be consecrated to Minerva. His creation exposes him to criticism and he turns to Minerva and to the temple's priesthood in despair, but the Goddess of Council advises him, »If you are wise, you will do your best in all you do. Don't fail yourself. Bring out the rings and display them.« What follows is a description of the carvings on the rings and their meaning, each symbolizing some aspect of Alberti's thought.

When examining the ring with an image of Pegasus above the waves, the meanings of wings, attached to the eye, are explained:

»The Pegasean horse represents the course of life and the fleeting age by which we are rushed along. As we hasten toward the heavens of a better life, we must use wings to avoid sinking into the waves. These wings are the powers of our human intellect and the gifts of our minds which help us attain even the heavens in our study of nature, and which join us to the gods in piety and virtue.«<sup>6</sup>

Alberti had that the human intellect, not the soul, attains heaven, and that it is aided by the study of the world/nature, a view toward which Cusanus gradually shifted later in his life.

Goddess of Counsel is particularly drawn to the ring with a bearded virgin's face. »Her hair is unbound, and a plumb-line hangs from her chin.« The figure of Genius, accompanying them, explicates the meaning as:

»The whole face of the mind must be pure and endowed with maidenly modesty, with no knot or covering, but bearded with maturity. In all we think and say to others and ourselves, we must test all our words and decisions by the plumb-line. Perfect uprightness and perfect gravity never deceive the plumb-line, and never lie.«<sup>7</sup>

Alberti, influenced by either the Aristotelian notion of *gravitas* or Vitruvius' comment (Book VII), declares that he looks at nature without preconception and relies purely on the absolute verticality of the plumb-line for such observation. His stance toward nature is empirical, never speculative. And in his approach he uses the lowly craft of the artisan for a high human pursuit: the understanding of the world. Meanwhile, in the 1450s, Cusanus gives more and more positive value toward the empirical understanding of the world through number and measurements.

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6 LEON BATTISTA ALBERTI, *Dinner Pieces*, trans. by DAVID MARSH, Binghamton, NY 1987, »Rings [*Anuli*]«, 216 (underlining mine).

7 *Ibid.*, 216–217.

On the ring, judged to be fairest of the twelve shows an unbroken circle, within which is inscribed the phrase: »YOURSELF. TO YOU. AND. TO GOD.« The Goddess of Counsel unfolds the meaning:

»There is nothing more capacious, more whole, or more durable than the circle. At every point it is perfectly suited to repelling blows, and its motion is the freest of all figures. We must remain within the safe and free circle of reason, that is, within humanity. For virtue is bound and tied to humanity, and God to virtue, which proceeds from God.«<sup>8</sup>

Here Alberti is declaring that our mind's investigation should remain within the realm of »humanity«; in other words, an understanding of ourselves will tie us to God. It should be noted that Cusanus writes the same statement in *De mente* (1450). The phrase »YOURSELF. TO YOU. AND. TO GOD« reminds us of Cusanus' affirmation of each human being's limited ability described in *De visione Dei* (1453), wherein he prays to God, asking for an answer that shall be received in his heart with the words: »Be your own and I will be yours.«<sup>9</sup>

Alberti's early writings reveal topics that later feed into Cusanus' metaphysical thoughts, but conversely Alberti never crossed the threshold into metaphysics. His investigative objectives firmly remained in this sensory world. In this sense he was the opposite of Cusanus who, in medieval theological tradition, stressed the importance of the mind's movement from sensation via reason [*ratio*] to intellect [*intellectus*]. Yet, in the 1450s Cusanus often expressed in his theological works and sermons the importance of reading/investigating/deciphering that sensory world.

Karsten Harries, in his insightful *Infinity and Perspective*, suggests that Cusanus might have been aware of Alberti's *De pictura* even when working on *De docta ignorantia* (1440), noting that he owned Alberti's *Elementa picturae* (ca. 1435), a shorter treatise written soon after *De pictura*.<sup>10</sup> Both Alberti and Cusanus recognized the limit of human perspectival vision. The concept of one-point perspective shared by Alberti and Cusanus is well known. This paper does not intend to add any contribution to this

8 Ibid., 215.

9 *De vis.* 7: h VI, n. 25, lin. 13: »Sis tu tuus et ego ero tuus.« Trans. in JASPER HOPKINS, Nicholas of Cusa's Dialectical Mysticism: Text, Translation, and Interpretive Study of *De visione dei*, Minneapolis, 1988, 147.

10 HARRIES, *Infinity* (see note 4) 68, 340 n. 6.

theme. Instead, the paper simply points out the following: Alberti succinctly states that the vanishing point is defined by lines that recede/extend »as if« to infinity (*quasi p[er] in infinito*), firmly staying in the sensory realm.<sup>11</sup> Cusanus's copy of *Elementa picturae*, currently housed in his library in Bernkastel-Kues, does not contain any of his marginalia – unlike other authors' theological writings in his possession. Perhaps he did not need such notations, because it is purely technical writing and was easy for him to understand. It is not clear when Cusanus acquired his copy. Yet, it is worth citing some phrases from *De pictura* (1435)/*Della pittura* (1436) in order to clarify the fundamental stance of Alberti later shared by Cusanus in the 1450s. At the beginning of the treatise Alberti states that he is writing not as a mathematician [i. e., philosopher], but as a painter, saying that while mathematicians measure only immaterial the forms on paper separated, »since we [painters] wish the object to be seen, we will use a more sensate wisdom.«<sup>12</sup> Painters, he notes, should stay in the empirical realm:

»No one would deny that the painter has nothing to do with things that are not visible. The painter is concerned solely with representing what can be seen.«<sup>13</sup>

In the process of representation, mathematical comparison/measurement is a necessary tool for painters:

»[...] all things are known by comparison, for comparison contains within itself a power which immediately demonstrates in objects which is more, less or equal.«<sup>14</sup>

Whether writing about painting, sculpture, or architecture, or cartography, Alberti discusses number and measurement simply for representation of form united with matter. He never discusses essence/quiddity. Similarly, yet in a subtly different way, Cusanus writes in *Idiota de mente* (1450) that the human mind conceives the immutable quiddities (*immutabiles concipit rerum quidditates*) such as number and geometrical form not embedded in matter, and that these, called exemplars or »measures-of-truth«, will be useful for better understanding of the empirical

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11 ALBERTI, On Painting, Book I; trans. see SPENCER, Alberti (see note 12) 56 & 110 n. 45.

12 LEON BATTISTA ALBERTI, On Painting, Book I: P[er] questo useremo quando dicono piu grassa Minerva; trans. in JOHN R. SPENCER, Leon Battista Alberti, On Painting, with introduction and notes by John R. Spencer, New Haven, 1956, 43. See also *ibid.*, 100 n. 7.

13 *Ibid.*, 43.

14 *Ibid.*, 55.

world. According to Cusanus, through this process one never produces quiddities of things embedded in matter, but one can grasp certain participations of the quiddities.<sup>15</sup>

### III. Cusanus' shift in the 1450s toward the Importance of Understanding/Reading the Empirical World

It is highly likely that the first fruitful encounter between Cusanus and Alberti occurred in the Jubilee Year of 1450; a year that marked a decisive turning point in Cusanus' philosophical thinking and related writings. In contrast to his earlier writings, such as *De docta ignorantia*, Cusanus' attitude toward an analysis of the physical world and the resulting empirical knowledge became more positive and optimistic during and after 1450. This evolution was not limited to his appreciation of nature in St. Francis's or Petrarch's sense of the word, but more specifically directed toward an active nature embedded in the human mind – examples of which Cusanus found not in theological writings, but »on the street«, in the practical/sensory world.<sup>16</sup>

In 1450 Cusanus was at the Papal Curia. Rome was in the midst of radical, physical change that ranged from large public buildings to smaller local projects, most of them restorations of aqueducts and ancient basilicas, in which engineers, stonemasons, and various artisans were involved. The progressive atmosphere created by these activities surely had a strong effect on Cusanus' thoughts.

This was the culture Cusanus faced in the city after he had experienced a crucial theological turn in 1446. In his »Buchmetaphorik als 'Apparitio Dei' in den Werken und Predigten des Nikolaus von Kues« Kazuhiko Yamaki writes that although Cusanus used the metaphor of »the world as the book written by God« throughout his career, in the year 1446 he recognized a very important shift in his thinking. In his sermon delivered on August 15, 1446 (Sermo LXXI), he states that:

15 *De mente* 7: h<sup>2</sup>V, n. 103, lin. 1–n. 105, lin. 6.

16 *De sap.* I: h<sup>2</sup>V, n. 3, lin. 12.



»[...] because [the seeker] attains the One, the Necessary Cause of all things, he seeks peace and rest in all things. He uses rightly the book written by God's Finger, vis., [the book of] the created world. He knows that every creature is a likeness of the One. He knows that the one heaven, when summoned forth from the not-one, arose in a likeness of the Absolute One. And [he knows] that the more [the heaven] was elevated away from the not-one, the closer it drew near to the One in terms of likeness.«<sup>17</sup>

The created world »written« by God is a notion common in Judeo-Christian tradition, but what is unique in the sermon is that Cusanus developed that idea to mean that every thing in the sensory world is one and only, that all creations are one in unity, and therefore that every situation in the world is none other than an immanence of God, or »*apparitio dei*« (appearance of God).<sup>18</sup> This recognition, combined with his observations of the advancement of engineering, propelled Cusanus towards more positive recognition of the sensory world.

1450 is the year in which we find concrete evidence that Cusanus and Alberti read each others' works. In his *De ludi matematici* (1440s), Alberti had proposed the use of lead/plumb weights, a light-weighted sphere, and a water-clock to measure the depth of the ocean. Cusanus discusses the same technique in his *De staticis experimentis* (1450) without mentioning Alberti changing the shape of the lead/plumb weights and substituting the light-weighted sphere with an apple.<sup>19</sup> Cusanus also borrowed Alberti's idea of measuring humidity by repeatedly weighing a piece of wool or sponge that absorbs moisture from the air.<sup>20</sup> In the same year, Cusanus wrote a mathematical treatise entitled *De circuli quadratura; De quadratura circuli*, from which, in turn, Alberti borrowed many ideas in writing his own similar treatise, *De lunularum quadratura*.<sup>21</sup>

17 *Sermo LXXI*: h XVI, n. 13, lin. 16: »Hic [quicumque quaerere voluerit veritatem] in omnibus quaerit pacem et requiem, quia unum omnium attingit necessariam causam, hic recte utitur libro Dei digito scripto, puta mundo creato, qui omnem creaturam unius scit assimilationem, qui scit unum caelum in assimilatione unius absoluti surrexisse de non-uno vocatum et tanto plus accessisse in assimilatione ad unum, quanto plus a non-unum elevatum!« Trans. in JASPER HOPKINS, *Nicholas of Cusa's Dialectic Sermons: A Selection*, Minneapolis, 2003, 154–155. See KAZUHIKO YAMAKI, *Buchmetaphorik als »Apparitio Dei« in den Werken und Predigten des Nikolaus von Kues*, MFCG 30 (2004) 122.

18 YAMAKI, *Buchmetaphorik* (see note 17) 122.

19 ALBERTI, *De ludi matematici* (1438-ca. 1450), Chap. 8; *De stat. exper.*: h <sup>2</sup>V, n. 181, p. 233, lin. 1–10.

20 ALBERTI, *De re aedificatoria* (1440s–1472), Book X, Chap. 3; *De stat. exper.*: h <sup>2</sup>V, n. 179, p. 231, lin. 19–p. 232, lin. 8.

21 HARRIES, *Infinity* (see note 4) 69 & 340 n. 6.

Yamaki states that in the 1450s the metaphor of »reading the world« was given more and more importance by Cusanus.<sup>22</sup> (Unlike his previous book metaphor increasing in *De genesi*.) Yamaki concludes that among the *idiotia* trilogy, *Idiotia de Sapientia* (1450) is about seeing »*apparitio Dei*« (the appearance of God) in the deeds of humans; while *Idiotia de mente* (1450) and *Idiotia de staticis experimentis* (1450) are about the legibility of the world's order.<sup>23</sup>

In *De staticis experimentis*, the layman (*idiotia*) states that the sensory world reveals truth:

»It seems to me that by reference to differences of weight we can more truly attain unto the hidden aspects of things and can know many things by means of more plausible surmises.«<sup>24</sup>

This notion of truth has nothing to do with the quiddities of things, but with the relative truth revealed by comparisons employing number and measurement. As Yamaki wrote, *Idiotia de staticis experimentis* is about the legibility of the world's order; but in its writing it is also clear that Cusanus was recording how and by what processes the human mind can partake of God. The various weight-related measuring techniques recorded in the *Idiotia de staticis experimentis* are a record of both the legibility of the sensory world and of the conceptualizations, through which human beings read the world. For the compilation of the measuring techniques, Cusanus borrowed ideas from, in addition to conversations with his colleagues in the Curia, writings by as Vitruvius, Hipparchus, Boethius, Augustine, and Alberti.<sup>25</sup> Recognizing that accurate measurements required iteration and reiteration, Cusanus left it to the layman to insist that closer readings of the empirical world require repetition:

»Experimental knowledge requires extensive written records. For the more written records there are, the more infallibly we can arrive, on the basis of experiments, at the art elicited from the experiments.«<sup>26</sup>

22 YAMAKI, Buchmetaphorik (see note 17) 117–121.

23 Ibid., 125.

24 *De stat. exper.*: h<sup>2</sup>V, n. 162, p. 222, lin. 1: »Ego per ponderum differentiam arbitror ad rerum secreta verius pertingi et multa sciri posse verisimiliori coniectura.« Trans. in JASPER HOPKINS, Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge, Minneapolis 1996, 321.

25 HOPKINS, Wisdom (see note 24) 76–77.

26 *De stat. exper.*: h<sup>2</sup>V, n. 178, p. 231, lin. 15–19: »Experimentalis scientia latas deposcit scripturas. Quando enim plures fuerint, tanto infallibilis de experimentis ad artem quae ex ipsis elicitur, posset deveniri.« Trans. in HOPKINS, Wisdom (see note 24) 347.

Yet, it is important to note that in the *Idiota de sapientia*, while Cusanus lets *idiotia* declare that although wisdom (*sapientia*) proclaims itself in the streets (I, 3, 5 & 7), wisdom dwells in the Highest (*in altissimis*) (I, 7).

Three years later, Cusanus went a step further in his *De visione Dei* (1453), stressing that intellect is firmly united with the body, and therefore does not function if it is separated from the senses:

»[...] because the intellect is united to the body through the medium of the sensible [power], it is not perfected apart from the senses. For whatever comes to it proceeds to it from the sensible world through the medium of the senses.«<sup>27</sup>

Here Cusanus asserted that human beings can move from sensation via reason to the intellect *without* abandoning the sensory-imaginative realm upon which human understanding relies. (According to Clyde Lee Miller and the late Lawrence Bond, the inseparability of intellect and senses means that human understanding may work in the opposite direction as well; viz., from intellectual contemplation to the sensory world, a relationship fully recognized by Cusanus in his final year.<sup>28</sup>) Thus, like Alberti, Cusanus stressed the importance of remaining in and reading the sensory world.

In his sermon delivered on September 5, 1456, his enthusiasm toward the sensory world finally became purely ecstatic:

»Look! How sensual works in nature are similar to Words or Idea of the Creator. God unfolds by means of natural forms that are folded inherently in itself, exactly like the intellect that unfolds itself through the movement of writing inside a sensual book. And the sensual things are like a book that matches the power of God, due to the fact that it is written either by movement or by nature.«<sup>29</sup>

Cusanus viewed the world as God being unfolded in front of his eyes; the world is in movement; either in the natural world or in the working human brain. It is worth noting that in his *De pictura* (1437), Alberti

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27 *De vis.* 24: h VI, n. 111, lin. 6: »[...] quia unitus est corpori per medium sensitivae, tunc sine sensibus non perficitur. Omne enim quod ad eum pervenit, de mundo sensibili per medium sensuum ad ipsum pergit.« Trans. in HOPKINS, *Dialectical Mysticism* (see note 9) 259.

28 CLYDE LEE MILLER, *Reading Cusanus: Metaphor and dialectic in a Conjectural Universe*, Washington, D. C. 2003, 179 n. 33.

29 *Sermo CCXLII*: h XIX, n. 22, lin. 1–7: »Considera [...] quo modo sensibilia naturae opera sunt similitudines verbi seu conceptus creatoris. Deus enim mediante natura explicat formas in ipso complicatas sicut intellectus, qui motu scripturae se ipsum in sensibili libro explicat; et sic sensibilia sunt liber motu seu natura scriptus Dei virtutem assimilans.« See YAMAKI, *Buchmetaphorik* (see note 17) 132 (Trans. & underlining mine).

holds that the most important genre of painting is »*historia*«, which is replete with movements of depicted figures.

While Cusanus was advancing his metaphysical thoughts to higher limits, Alberti was revising and rewriting his *De re aedificatoria*, of the first five books of which were dedicated to Pope Nicholas V in 1452. Usually, Alberti's interests lay in the appearance of things and human conceptualization that are firmly rooted in the sensory realm. However, in his *De re aedificatoria*, Book VII (»Ornament to Sacred Buildings«), Chapter 17, when discussing whether a temple should house a likeness (statue) of God to whom the temple is dedicated, Alberti introduces an argument that echoes Cusanus' thoughts on the impossibility of »seeing« God – the limited ability of humans to find their own faces in God's Face, which yet encourages humans' spiritual movement toward the Face.<sup>30</sup> Alberti writes:

»There are those who maintain that a temple should contain no statues. King Numa, it is said, being a follower of Pythagoras, forbade there to be any effigy in a temple. It was also for this reason that Seneca ridiculed both himself and his fellow citizens: ›We pray,‹ he said, ›with dolls like children.‹ Yet instructed by our elders and appealing to reason, we would argue that no one could be so misguided as to fail to realize that the gods should be visualized in the mind, and not with the eyes. Clearly no form can ever succeed in imitating or representing, in even the slightest degree, such greatness. If no object made by hand could achieve this, they thought it better that, each, according to his own powers of imagination, should fashion in his mind an impression of the principal sovereign of all, the divine intelligence. In this way the veneration of the majesty of his name would be all the more spontaneous.«<sup>31</sup>

This is in concordance with Cusanus' assertion that humans cannot successfully visualize God's Face and that human vision of God should be pursued in the mind, not with the physical eyes. Indeed, filled with theological terms, it does not sound like the usual Alberti. He continues with an opposing view:

»Others think differently; they maintain that it would be sound and prudent to give the gods the image and likeness of man: if the presence of statues were to cause the ignorant to believe that as they approached, they were approaching the gods themselves, it would make it easier for them to turn their minds from the depravity of life.«<sup>32</sup>

30 *De vis.* 6: h VI, n. 19, lin. 15–20.

31 LEON BATTISTA ALBERTI, *De re aedificatoria*, Book VII, Chap. 17; trans. in JOSEPH RYKWERT, NEIL LEACH, and ROBERT TAVERNOR trans., Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, Massachusetts and London 1988, 241–242 (underlining mine).

32 *Ibid.*, 242 (underlining mine).

Seemingly stating an opposite opinion, this remark is perfectly consistent with Cusanus' thinking that conceptualized images of God created by artists, with human appearances, nonetheless stimulate man's progression toward God. In juxtaposing these opposites, Alberti uses Cusanus' »riddling« style of argument, as if to express his alliance with Cusanus' theology. Therefore, it can be said that not only was Cusanus influenced by the empirical thoughts of Alberti, but also that Alberti understood Cusanus' metaphysical speculation.

Cusanus' affirmation of the sensory world accelerates to the end of his life. In *De beryllo* (1458) Cusanus declared that the world is the manifestation of God and that we should read it:

»[...] perceptible objects are the senses' books; in these books the intention of the Divine Intellect is described in perceptible figures. And the intention is the manifestation of God the Creator.«<sup>33</sup>

Meanwhile, there occurred another important development in Cusanus' theology. In his essay »The Late Works of Nicholas of Cusa«, Edward Cranz compares *De coniecturis* (1442–43) and *De beryllo* (1458). In *De coniecturis*, Cusanus contended that God was beyond the coincidence of opposites and that the intellect functions within the realm of coincidence; in *De beryllo*, Cusanus said that aided by the intellectual beryl (intellectual magnifier) »we wish to see God as the indivisible principle«. (*Volumus autem ipsum ut principium indivisibile.*) (*De beryllo*, VIII, 4–5)<sup>34</sup> This is a radical proposition, by which Cusanus tried to see God Himself in His entirety. Cusanus' main theme in *De beryllo* is that, unlike ancient philosophers, one should start speculative movement from God who acts not out of necessity but out of will and intention. At this moment, Cusanus' goal was an immediate vision of God as the First Principle. Later, Cusanus devised »new names« for God: *Possest* (actualized possibility: coincidence of »to be able« [*posse*] and »to be« [*esse*]) in the *Triologus de possest* (1460); *Non aliud* (Not other) in *De non aliud* (1461); and *Posse*

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33 *De beryl.*: h. XI/1, n. 66, lin. 3–5: »Sensibilia enim sunt sensuum libri, in quibus est intentio divini intellectus in sensibilibus figures descripta, et est intentio ipsius dei creatoris manifestatio.« Trans. in JASPER HOPKINS, *Nicholas of Cusa: Metaphysical Speculations*, Minneapolis 1998, 68.

34 F. EDWARD CRANZ, *The Late Works of Nicholas of Cusa, Nicholas of Cusa and the Renaissance*, edited by Thomas M. Izbicki and Gerald Christianson, Aldershot 2009, 47; the essay was originally published in GERALD CHRISTIANSON and THOMAS M. IZBICKI eds., *Nicholas of Cusa: In Search of God and Wisdom*, Leiden 1991, 141–160.

*ipsum* (Possibility itself) in his last work *De apice theoriae* (1464). Cranz summarizes Cusanus' shift from negative theology to positive theology. Whether positive or negative, Cusanus consistently asserts that mathematical concepts composed of number and geometrical figures display an exactness and precision not available in other domains of human knowledge. In *De Posse* he writes:

»[...] mathematical [entities] are neither an essence (*quid*) nor a quality (*quale*); rather, they are notional entities elicited from our reason. Without these notional entities reason could not proceed with its work, e. g., with building, measuring, and so on. But the divine works, which proceed from the divine intellect, remain unknown to us precisely as they are. If we know something about them, we surmise it by likening a figure to a form.«<sup>35</sup>

Mathematical entities are an important measure in reading the world; however, they are not any more viewed by Cusanus as immutable *quid* but seen as mere notional entities. (It should be remembered here that in *Idiota de mente* (1450) he called number and geometrical form, conceived by human mind and not embedded in matter, »immutable quiddities.«)

After making *posse* the center of his argument in *Compendium* (1464), Cusanus reaches the name of *Posse ipsum*. In *De apice theoriae*, Cusanus clarifies the meaning of *Posse ipsum* as: »Possibility itself-without which nothing whatsoever is possible.«<sup>36</sup> Since the word »*posse*« is associated with God, it conveys not only the idea of possibility but also the idea of a potent agent for movement.<sup>37</sup> A very important, well-known passage (in which we can find a rare, joyous and content Cusanus) needs to be quoted here. He found that Quiddity must also be Possibility.<sup>38</sup>

»[...] although for many years now I have realized that quiddity must be sought beyond all cognitive power and before all variation and opposition, I failed to notice that Quid-

35 *De poss.*: h XI/2, n. 43, lin. 10–18: »Et non sunt illa mathematicalia neque quid neque quale sed notionalia a ratione nostra elicta, sine quibus non posset in suum opus procedere, scilicet aedificare, mensurare et cetera. Sed opera divina, quae ex divino intellectu procedunt, manent nobis uti sunt praecise incognita, et si quid cognoscimus de illis, per assimilationem figurae ad formam coniecturamur.« Trans. in JASPER HOPKINS, *A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Minneapolis 1986, 111–113.

36 *De ap. theor.*: h XII, n. 4, lin. 9: »posse ipsum, sine quo nihil quicquam potest.« Trans. in HOPKINS, *Metaphysical Speculations* (see note 33) 240.

37 See HOPKINS, *Metaphysical Speculations* (see note 33) 324, n. 21.

38 *Ibid.*, 323, n. 18.

dity which exists in and of itself is the invariable subsistent-being of all substances-and, thus, that it is neither replicable nor repeatable and, hence, that there are no different Quiddities of different beings but that there is one and the same [ultimate] Basis (*hypostasis*) of all things. Subsequently, I saw that I must acknowledge that the [ultimate] Basis of things, or [ultimate] Subsistent-being of things, is *possible* to be. And because it is possible to be, surely it cannot exist apart from Possibility itself (*posse ipsum*). For how would it be possible apart from Possibility? And so, Possibility itself (*posse ipsum*) – without which nothing whatsoever is possible – is that, than which there cannot possibly be anything more subsistent. Therefore, it is Whatness itself, which is being sought – i. e., is Quiddity itself, without which there cannot possibly exist anything. And with enormous delight I have been engaged in this contemplative reflection during this festive season.<sup>39</sup>

For Cusanus, from this point on, only *Posse ipsum* and its »appearance« should be taken into consideration. From such thinking, the concept of »being«, or quiddity itself, disappears. And creatures are no longer analyzed as »being« but as appearances of the »*Posse ipsum*«. Cusanus enthusiastically wrote about this new conviction:

»Now I propose to reveal to you this easily accessible path that was not openly communicated before and which I think most secret: that all precision-of-speculation (*omnem praecisionem speculativam*) is to be fixed only on »*Posse ipsum*« and its appearances, and that all who have seen rightly have tried to express this truth (»*Posse ipsum*« and its appearances). Those who affirmed that there is only One, looked to the »*Posse ipsum*«. Those who said that there are One and Many, looked to the »*Posse ipsum*« and to the many manifested modes of being. [...] One would see that every number is only a manifestation of the innumerable and interminable power of oneness, for numbers are only special modes-of-manifestation of the power of oneness. [...] Accordingly, with such analyses (*resolutionibus*) you will see that all [these speculative matters] are easy and that all differences pass over into a concordance.«<sup>40</sup>

39 *De ap. theor.*: h XII, n. 4, lin. 1–13: »[...] igitur iam annis multis viderim ipsam ultra omnem potentiam cognitivam ante omnem varietatem et oppositionem quaeri oportere, non attendi quiditatem in se subsistentem esse omnium substantiarum invariabilem subsistentiam; ideo nec multiplicabilem nec plurificabilem, et hinc non aliam et aliam aliorum entium quiditatem, sed eandem omnium hypostasim. Deinde vidi necessario fateri ipsam rerum hypostasim seu subsistentiam posse esse. Et quia potest esse, utique sine posse ipso non potest esse. Quomodo enim sine posse posset? Ideo posse ipsum, sine quo nihil quicquam potest, est quo nihil subsistentius esse potest. Quare est ipsum quid quaesitum seu quiditas ipsa, sine qua non potest esse quicquam. Et circa hanc theoriam in his festivitatibus versatus sum cum ingenti delectatione.« Trans. in HOPKINS, *Metaphysical Speculations* (see note 33) 240.

40 *De ap. theor.*: h XII, n. 14, lin. 4–11, 17–19, n. 15, lin. 19–20: »Hanc nunc facilitatem tibi pandere propono prius non aperte communicatam, quam secretissimam arbitror: puta omnem praecisionem speculativam solum in posse ipso et eius apparitione ponendam, ac quod omnes qui recte viderunt, hoc conati sunt exprimere. Qui enim unum tantum affirmabant, ad posse ipsum respiciebant. Qui unum et multa dixerunt, ad posse

Here Cusanus reiterates what he stressed in *De posset*: even mathematical entities are merely notional. And all different appearances of God's manifestation are to be enfolded into God, *Posse-ipsium*. In the *De Apice theoriae*, referring to the *Idiota de sapientia*, Cusanus states that truth proclaims itself in the streets and is easy to find.<sup>41</sup> This time, however, as Cranz rightly pointed out, he carefully leaves out the layman's comment regarding the whereabouts of wisdom's abode. With his final conclusion, Cusanus could fully embrace Alberti, who had steadily resisted metaphysical speculation and focused on appearances and the human representations of them. Indeed, Cusanus could have said to Alberti without any hesitation: »Be your own and God will be yours«, echoing the inscription »Yourself. To you. And to God.« of the fairest of the rings described in Alberti's Anuli.

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ipsum et eius multos apparitionis essendi modos respexerunt. [...] videret omnem numerum non nisi apparitionem ipsius posse unitatis innumerabilis et interminabilis. Numeri enim nihil sunt nisi speciales modi apparitionis ipsius posse unitatis. [...] Talibus igitur resolutionibus vides cuncta facilia et omnem differentiam transire in concordantiam.« Cranz's and Hopkins' translations are used and modified: CRANZ, *Later Works* (see note 34) 58; HOPKINS, *Metaphysical Speculations* (see note 33) 245–246.

41 *De ap. theor.*: h XII, n. 3, lin. 9–13; CRANZ, *Late Works* (see note 34) 56, n. 52.