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Time, History, and Providence in the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa
Tiempo, Historia y Providencia en la Filosofía de Nicolás de Cusa
Tempo, História e Providência na Filosofia de Nicolau de Cusa

Jason ALEKSANDER¹

Resumo: Embora Nicholas de Cusa ocasionalmente tenha discutido que o Universo deva ser entendido como o *desdobramento do absolutamente infinito de tempo*, ele deixou perguntas abertas sobre a distinção entre tempo natural e tempo histórico, como qualquer noção de tempo poderia depender da natureza de providência divina, e como a compreensão dele de providência divina se relaciona a outras visões filosóficas tradicionais. A partir de textos nos quais o cusano discutiu estas questões, esse artigo tentará explicitar como Nicolau de Cusa entendeu a providência divina. O artigo também discutirá como a visão do cusano sobre a providência poderia explicar a contribuição da filosofia do Renascimento ao desenvolvimento histórico de uma secularizada filosofia de História.

Abstract: Although Nicholas of Cusa occasionally discussed how the universe must be understood as the unfolding of the absolutely infinite in time, he left open questions about any distinction between natural time and historical time, how either notion of time might depend upon the nature of divine providence, and how his understanding of divine providence relates to other traditional philosophical views. From texts in which Cusanus discussed these questions, this paper will attempt to make explicit how Cusanus understood divine providence. The paper will also discuss how Nicholas of Cusa's view of the question of providence might shed light on Renaissance philosophy's contribution in the historical transition in Western philosophy from an overtly theological or eschatological understanding of historical time to a secularized or naturalized philosophy of history.

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Nicholas of Cusa does not frequently use the term *providentia*. Across noun cases, there are 67 occurrences of the term in the *Opera omnia*.² Of these 67 occurrences, there are 40 in Nicholas's speculative works and 27 in his sermons.³ But of the 40 occurrences in the speculative works, 32 are concentrated in four works, with nine occurrences in *De concordantia catholica*, fifteen in *De docta ignorantia* I.22, and four in each *De visione Dei* 4 and *De venatione sapientiae* 20-21.

It strikes me as perplexing, that, in the work of a Catholic philosopher so pervasively concerned with the way in which the human intellect is positioned on the horizon⁴ between the created world and the eternal from which it is

² Latin references to the works of NICHOLAS OF CUSA are to *Nicolai de Cusa Opera omnia iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heigelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita* as reproduced by the Cusanus Portal of the Institute for Cusanus Research at the University of Trier (<http://www.cusanus-portal.de/>). Translations of *De docta ignorantia* and *De vision Dei* are those of H. Lawrence BOND in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997); unless noted otherwise, translations of all other primary sources are those of Jasper HOPKINS in *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*, 2 vol. (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2001). Section references for all works follow the *Opera omnia*.

³ These statistics were gathered through a word search in the online Cusanus Portal of the Institute for Cusanus Research at the University of Trier. The sermons in which the term occurs are: 14, 18, 67, 103 (three times), 116, 134 (three times), 149, 183, 187, 193, 196 (twice), 222, 230, 242 (twice), 243, 246 (twice), 248, 251, 262, 291. In addition to the speculative works cited above, the term also occurs in: *De coniecturis*, *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, *Idiota de mente*, *De theologicis complementis*, *De principio*, *De li non aliud* (twice), and the *Compendium*.

⁴ For instance: "Spiritus autem intellectualis, cuius operatio est supra tempus quasi in horizonte aeternitatis, quando se ad aeterna convertit, non potest ipsa in se convertere, cum sint aeterna et incorruptibilia. Sed nec ipse, cum sit incorruptibilis, ita se in ipsa convertit, ut desinat esse intellectualis substantia; sed convertitur in ipsa, ut absorbeatur in similitudinem aeternorum, secundum gradus tamen, ut magis ad ipsa et ferventius conversus magis et

unfolded, Nicholas offers so little explicit discussion of the extent to which this horizon functions through or in relationship to divine providence (and this peculiarity is all the more surprising in light of Nicholas' deep indebtedness to the thought of St. Augustine of Hippo). Nevertheless, the concept of divine providence is itself historically significant, so it is my hope that discussing Nicholas' understanding of providence will also help understand *his* historical significance.

Almost all discussions of providence involve a *beginning*, and, in conformity with tradition, the eastern horizon of my discussion of providence in Nicholas' philosophy is the *De docta ignorantia* of 1440.⁵ Here, in a chapter titled "How the Providence of God Unites Contradiction," Nicholas defines providence in relation to his familiar metaphors of *complicatio* (*enfolding*) and *explicatio* (*unfolding*) by explaining that

Et quoniam ex prioribus manifestum est Deum esse omnium complicationem, etiam contradictorium, unum nihil potest eius effugere providentiam; sive enim fecerimus aliquid sive eius oppositum aut nihil, totum in Dei providentia implicitum fuit. Nihil igitur nisi secundum Dei providentiam eveniet.... Ita Dei providentia infinita complicat tam ea, quae evenient, quam quae non evenient, sed evenire possunt, et contraria, sicut genus complicat contrarias differentias. Et ea, quae scit, non scit cum differentia temporum, quia non scit futura ut futura, nec praeterita ut praeterita, sed aeternae et mutabilia immutabiliter (*De docta ignorantia*, I.22.67-68).

profundius ab aeternis perficiatur et abscondatur eius esse in ipso aeterno esse." ("However, when an intellectual spirit, whose operation is above time and, *as if on eternity's horizon*, turns toward eternal things, it cannot convert them into itself, because they are eternal and incorruptible. But because it in itself is incorruptible, it is not converted into them so that it ceases to be an intellectual substance; rather, it is concerted in them in such a way that it is absorbed into a likeness of eternal things. However, this occurs in degrees, so that the more fervently an intellectual spirit is turned toward eternal things, the more thoroughly it is perfected by them and the more profoundly its being is hidden in the eternal being itself" *De docta ignorantia*, III.9.236, my emphasis).

⁵ Although *De concordantia catholica* (1433-1434) was written well before *De docta ignorantia*, *De docta ignorantia* is traditionally understood as inaugurating Nicholas' speculative philosophy. Moreover, Nicholas does not provide a sustained discussion of providence in the *De concordantia catholica*; in fact, about half of the occurrences of the term in it occur in Nicholas' quotations or paraphrases from other sources, and all of the occurrences are scattered throughout the work. Consequently, I will be focusing primarily on the occurrences in *De docta ignorantia*, *De visione Dei*, and *De venatione sapientiae*.



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(Since, as the preceding has shown, God is the enfolding of all things, even of contradictories, nothing is able to escape God's providence. Whether we have done one thing or its opposite or nothing at all, everything has been enveloped in the providence of God. Nothing, therefore, will happen except according to God's providence.... In this way the infinite providence of God enfolds both the things that will happen and also those that will not but can happen, and it enfolds contraries, as a genus enfolds contrary differentiae. And God's providence does not know the things that it knows according to a difference of times, because it does not know the future as future nor the past as past, but it knows mutable things in eternal and unchanging ways.)

As Hans Blumenberg has noted, this understanding of providence “already carries in itself the germ of the return of voluntarism to the concept of creation that characterizes [Nicholas'] late phase.... Thus in the Cusan's early work, providence is already referred to the concept of possibility, so that it would remain unaltered even if something were to happen that in fact will not happen.”⁶ From this Blumenberg goes on to conclude that, for Nicholas, “the individual cannot find a justification of his existence in the concept of providence.”

For the moment, I'll note that I concur with Blumenberg that Nicholas' understanding of providence in this early work already anticipates later developments in his metaphysics. However, to assess the extent to which Blumenberg may be right in claiming that Nicholas' articulation of divine providence is severed from the question of human self-justification, we must first turn to Nicholas' discussion of providence in chapter four of *De visione Dei*, a chapter that is titled “God's vision is said to be providence, grace, and eternal life.” Here, in the passage that begins the long prayer of the *De visione Dei*, Nicholas compares our self-understanding with respect to divine providence to the experience of viewing a portrait of an omnivoyant face that he had sent (along with the recently completed *De visione Dei*) to the Benedictine abbey at Tegernsee in 1453 –an experience that, given the references to the east, south, then west in the passage quoted below also seems metonymically to link metaphors for human vision with images of the movement of the sun:

Accede nunc tu, frater contemplator, ad dei eiconam, et primum te loces ad orientem, deinde ad meridiem ac ultimo ad occasum; et quia visus eiconae te aequae undique respicit et non deserit, quocumque pergas, in te excitabitur

⁶ *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. WALLACE (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983), p. 522.



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speculatio provocaberisque et dices: Domine, nunc in hac tua imagine providentiam tuam quadam sensibili experientia intueor. Nam si me non deseris, qui sum vilissimus omnium, nusquam cuiquam deeris. (*De visione Dei*, 4.9)

(Now, brother contemplative, approach the icon of God. First stand to the east, then to the south, and finally to the west. And because the icon's gaze regards you equally everywhere and does not leave you wherever you may go, a contemplation will arise in you, and you will be stirred saying: "Lord, in this image of you I now behold your providence by a certain sensible experience. For if you do not abandon me, the vilest of all, you will never abandon anyone. Indeed, you are present to all and to each, just as being, without which they cannot exist, is present to all and to each.")

This way of experiencing oneself in the divine vision, Nicholas goes on to claim, provides a way to recognize why all beings prefer the perfections most suitable to them,

Ita enim tu, domine, intueris quodlibet, quod est, ut non possit concipi per omne id, quod est, te aliam curam habere, quam ut id solum sit meliori modo, quo esse potest, atque quod omnia alia, quae sunt, ad hoc solum sint, ut serviant ad id, quod illud sit optime, quod tu respicis. (*De visione Dei*, 4.9)

(For you, Lord, so look on anything that exists that no existing thing can conceive that you have any other care but that it alone exist in the best manner possible for it and that all other existing things exist only for the purpose of serving the best state of the one which you are beholding.)

Thus it is through our awareness of *pro-videntia* that we are led to the recognition that in the *videndi* or *visione* of God

Ubi est hortus deliciarum omnium, quae desiderari poterunt, quo nihil melius non solum per omnem hominem aut angelum excogitari, sed nec omni essendi modo esse potest. Nam est ipsa absoluta maximitas omnis desiderii rationalis, quae maior esse nequit. (*De visione Dei*, 4.12)

(Here is the source of all the delights that can be desired. Nothing better can be thought by any human being or angel, and nothing better can exist by any mode of being, for this source is the absolute maximumness, unable to be greater, of every rational desire.)

And, if we turn to the western horizon of Nicholas' late writings, in the *De venatione sapientiae* of 1463, we see that this understanding of divine providence remains a feature of his thinking, though he now spells out more explicitly than



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in the above passage from the *De visione Dei* what it is that divine providence provides for humans striving to live in the best possible manner for themselves:

Divina enim providentia, sicut non deficit in necessariis, ita non habundat in superfluis... Quare, cum homo secundum intellectualem animam laudabilia naturaliter cognoscat et amplectatur delicieturque in illis tamquam in cibo naturae suae conformi, hinc scit se de his naturaliter esse, quae ob conformitatem naturalem ad suum esse laudat et amplectitur. Habet igitur intellectus in se dono divinae providentiae omnem sibi necessariam scientiam principiorum, per quae venatur suae naturae conforme, et infallibile est hoc iudicium. (*De venatione sapientiae*, 20.57)

(For just as Divine Providence does not stint with regard to things that are necessities, so it does not lavish with regard to things that are superfluities... Therefore, since in accordance with his intellectual soul man naturally knows praiseworthy things and embraces them and delights in them as in food compatible with his nature, he knows that he naturally exists from those things which he praises and embraces on account of their natural compatibility with his own being. Therefore, by the gift of Divine Providence the intellect has within itself all the knowledge-of-principles that is necessary for it [to have]. By means of these principles the intellect pursues what is compatible with its nature, and its judgment [in this respect] is infallible.) [emendations are Hopkins']

All of these passages concerning divine providence, I think, raise precisely the question opened for us by the remark from Blumenberg regarding the human capacity for self-justification in its recognition of divine providence. Returning for a moment to the discussion of providence in chapter four of the *Dei visione Dei*, Nicholas has described an experience in which a person arrives at a state of blessedness through the contemplation of “eternal life in a mirror, in an icon, in an enigma” (“in speculo, in eicona, in aenigmate vitam aeternam” *De visione Dei*, 4.12).

Thus, the soul’s recognition of its eternal nature that is the precondition for its blessedness is in some way dependent upon temporal action, which is to say that Nicholas maintains that blessedness is dependent both upon an unfolding of our own will through time and the enfolding of sensation in the soul’s recognition of its eternity. As he puts it in this same chapter,

Dedisti mihi, domine, esse et id ipsum tale, quod se potest gratiae et bonitatis tuae continue magis capax reddere. Et haec vis, quam a te habeo, in qua virtutis omnipotentiae tuae vivam imaginem teneo, est libera voluntas, per quam possum aut ampliare aut restringere capacitatem gratiae tuae; ampliare quidem per



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conformitatem, quando nitor esse bonus, quia tu bonus, quando nitor esse iustus, quia tu iustus, quando nitor esse misericors, quia tu misericors, quando non nisi omnis conatus meus est ad te conversus, quia omnis conatus tuus est ad me converses. (*De visione Dei*, 4.11.)

(O Lord, you have given me being of such kind that it can make itself ever more capable to receive your grace and goodness. And this power, which I hold from you and in which I possess a living image of your almighty power, is free will. By it I can increase or restrict my capacity for your grace. I am able to increase it through conformity, when I strive to be good because you are good, [strive] to be just because you are just, and [strive] to be merciful because you are merciful, when all my striving is turned only toward you because all [your striving (*conatus tuus*)] is turned toward me.) [my emendations]

However, in *De filiatione Dei* (1445), a work composed well before the *De visione Dei*, Nicholas has already indicated how such an understanding must raise a concern with the *temporal means* of producing such an experience.

Admonemur nos, qui ad filiationem dei aspiramus, non inhaerere sensibilibus, quae sunt aenigmatica signa veri, sed ipsis ob infirmitatem nostram absque adhaesione coinquinationis ita uti, quasi per ipsa nobis loquatur magister veritatis et libri sint mentis eius expressionem continentes. Et tunc in sensibilibus contemplabimur intellectualia et ascendemus quadam improporionali comparatione de transitoriis et fluidis temporalibus, quorum esse est in instabili fluxu, ad aeterna, ubi rapta est omnis successio in fixam quietis permanentiam, et vacabimus circa speculationem verae, iustae et gaudiosae vitae separantes nos ab omni inquinamento deorsum se trahente, ut possimus cum ardenti desiderio studii circa ipsum eam ipsam vitam magistrali adeptione hinc absoluti introire. (*De filiatione Dei*, II.61)

(We who aspire unto being God's sons are admonished not to cling to sensible objects, which are symbolic signs of the true, but rather, because of our infirmity, to use these objects—without any polluting adherence thereto—in the following manner: as if through them the Teacher-of-truth were speaking to us and as if they were books containing the expression of His mind. And, in that case, we will contemplate intellectual things in and through sensible things; and we will ascend [contemplatively], by means of a certain disproportional parallelism, from transitory and insubstantial temporal things, whose being is in constant flux, unto eternal things, where all succession is caught up into the abiding permanency of rest. And we will have leisure for the contemplation of that true, just, and joyous life. We will be free from all pollution (which draws us downward), so that with ardent desire for learning more of God, and being free from this world, we can enter into that life by attaining mastery.) [emendation is Hopkins']



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This emphasis on the temporalized experience through which a human being strives to realize its contemplative potentiality seems to situate Nicholas somewhere between an Aristotelian understanding of *eudaimonia* –a happiness that is limited to the extent that humans, insofar as they are human, always need external resources of the temporal world, even for contemplation– and the traditional Christian/Plotinian neo-Platonic emphasis on the soul’s ontological condition as emanated from a transcendent divine intellect.

But, what I think is more significant is the way in which Nicholas of Cusa’s thinking here may be understood as a barometer of historical transformation in Renaissance thought. It is significant that Nicholas of Cusa’s understanding can be compared with its predecessors in the Western philosophical tradition since the Renaissance partly accomplishes an historical transformation in Western thought by turning to what it regarded (and imagined) as a *prisca* for its articulation of (a Christian) *humanitas*.

I will say more about the question of Nicholas’ historical significance toward the end of this paper, but at this point it is necessary first to note that it is precisely because of this temporal condition of striving (*conatus*), that Nicholas of Cusa’s philosophy opens onto an ethical consideration that often seems either absent from his writings or buried in the language of his Christology. Or, perhaps, if the discussion of providence so far is any indication, it may be fair to say that the ethical considerations are present all along but remain largely implicit in his thinking. At any rate, to understand how this ethical consideration emerges, it will be helpful, I think, to see what separates Nicholas’ understanding of providence from traditional articulations of the relationship between human history and natural time.

Traditionally (for Christianity, at any rate), divine providence links the ideas the possibility of and means to salvation to the ideas of an archaic creation and the Fall of man on the one hand and to a final Judgment on the other hand. But Nicholas seems to arrive in his late writings –i.e., those composed from 1459 to 1464– at the conclusion that neither creation nor Judgment can be in, or even at the limits of, time.⁷ In rejecting the traditional Christian understanding of the

⁷ With regard to Nicholas’ abandonment of a worldly *arche*, see, for instance, *De principio* (1559) § 11 and, even more tellingly, *De venatione sapientiae* 39.117: “[Posse fieri] est igitur perpetuum, cum habeat initium et annihilari non possit, sed terminus eius sit suum initium” (“Therefore it [posse-fieri] is perpetual, since it has a beginning but cannot be annihilated



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human significance of an historical *arche* and *eschaton*, Nicholas flattens any distinction between time as a feature of the natural world and human history as a feature of our relationship to our own ontological status as created *in imago dei*. So-called “natural time” is nothing but “history;” for Nicholas so-called natural time is created by the rational soul as an instrument for its recognition of its possibilities for perfection according to its underlying ontological condition, but this ontological condition is no longer determined in relation to any single *arche* or *eschaton* in or at the limits of the world. As he puts it in a well-known passage from the *De ludo globi* of 1463,

Creat anima sua inventione nova instrumenta, ut discernat et noscat, ut Ptolomaeus astrolabium et Orpheus lyram et ita de multis. Neque ex aliquo extrinseco inventores crearunt illa, sed ex propria mente. Explicarunt enim in sensibili materia conceptum. Sic annus, mensis, horae sunt instrumenta mensurae temporis per hominem creatae. Sic tempus, cum sit mensura motus, mensurantis animae est instrumentum. Non igitur dependet ratio animae a tempore, sed ratio mensurae motus, quae tempus dicitur, ab anima rationali dependet; quare anima rationalis non est tempori subdita, sed ad tempus se habet anterioriter. (*De ludo globi*, II.94)

(The soul by its own inventiveness creates new instruments in order to discern and to know [in the way that] Ptolemy invented the astrolabe, Orpheus invented the lyre, and so on. Inventors created these instruments not from something extrinsic but from their own minds. For they unfolded their conceptions in a [sensible] material. [Thus,] *year, month, hours* are instruments of a temporal measure created by man. Thus, since time is the measure of motion, it is the instrument of the measuring soul. Therefore, the soul’s measuring-scale does not depend on time; instead, the scale for the measuring of motion –a measuring which is called time– depends on the rational soul. Therefore, the rational soul is not subjected

and since its end-point is its beginning-point”). With regard to his rejection of any notion of a worldly *eschaton*, Matthieu van der MEER has shown that, in both his sermons and his speculative writings, Nicholas’ Christology is linked to an eschatology only until about 1455, at which time he stops discussing the question of the last days altogether (“World without End: Nicholas of Cusa’s View of Time and Eternity”? in *Christian Humanism Essays in Honour of Arjo Vanderjagt* [Brill, 2009], pp. 317-337 at p. 321). Van der Meer claims that Nicholas abandons eschatological considerations in both his sermons and his speculative works. As a matter of fact, however, the only philosophical work in which Nicholas explicitly discusses eschatology is *Coniectura de ultimis diebus* (1446). But even in this text, van der Meer points out, Nicholas cautions: “almost everyone who has written so far about the order of times, has been deceived by faulty surmising” (qtd. in Van der Meer p. 321). Accordingly, Van der Meer concludes, “Cusanus does not take his own [philosophical] speculations very seriously” (p. 321).



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to time; rather, it exists antecedently to time.) [My emendations; emphases are Hopkins']

Reading this passage from *De ludo globi* in light of the passage from *De filiatione Dei* quoted above thus allows us to see how the ethical dimension of Nicholas' thinking emerges as a conception of the human soul's hermeneutic freedom –of the human potentiality for self-justification in its recognition of the necessity of divine providence. Taken in this way, Blumenberg must certainly be regarded as simply mistaken in asserting that Nicholas maintains the view that “the individual cannot find a justification of his existence in the concept of providence”.

And yet, read more charitably, Blumenberg's comment might be read as a way of highlighting the consequence of the fact that, in conceiving divine providence as a hermeneutic framework within which human beings confront themselves as subjects, Nicholas has nevertheless abandons the traditional mooring of the idea of salvation to the idea of final Judgment.

Indeed Blumenberg's insistence on reading Nicholas' approach to this issue as a “return to volunteerism” tacitly recognizes why Nicholas' understanding that *all* historical events refer to the same hypostatic union with God in fact generates a unique understanding of the role of history –or, what is the same thing for Nicholas, of the role of the self-constituting temporality of human reason– as a condition for the possibility of salvation. But this point requires a different elaboration than Blumenberg offers.⁸ For Nicholas, all historical events, insofar as they are the unfolding of divine providence, are conceptually linked to the significance of the Incarnation– though these conceptual links are themselves only historically contingent images (or interpretations)⁹ of the Incarnation.

⁸ It is not my intention to offer a sustained criticism of Blumenberg's interpretation of Nicholas in this essay. Suffice it to note that I am in general agreement with Elizabeth BRIENT's argument in *The Immanence of the Infinite: Hans Blumenberg and the Threshold to Modernity* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002) that Blumenberg's emphasis on what he saw as a predominately nominalist aspect of Nicholas' philosophy caused him to misidentify how this philosophy might indeed be said to expose an epochal transformation in the making.

⁹ It seems right to think that, for Nicholas, the *significance* of Incarnation functions through accommodative revelation (and, hence, “interpretation” of it through interpretations of our own histories would be crucial to our attentiveness to ethical concerns). See, for instance, *De genesi* § 159 regarding the accommodative language of scripture.



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Thus, to the extent that one might speak of an *arche* or *eschaton* for Nicholas, one may speak only of an eternal referent for *any* temporal activity whatsoever –or, more precisely, the *arche* and *eschaton* of each and every historical unfolding derives its significance and self-justification solely in relation to the Incarnation, an “event” that is both unfolded in time and yet also enfolds the meanings of all other temporal events.

Accordingly, a person (or, if we were to bring a discussion of the *De pace fidei* or Nicholas’ writings on church reform to bear on this question, not just a person but also a people) *becomes* god-like by acting in ways that resemble God. Or, in other words, salvation is made possible on the condition that the soul *is* timeless, but because the soul creates time as an instrument for measuring sensations and making them significant to its *turning to* its salvation, the condition for the realization of salvation remains thoroughly embedded in the soul’s own self-constituting temporality.¹⁰

It is in view of this conception that it seems to me that Nicholas’ understanding of providence is poised to rupture through the idiom of its theological articulation into a humanist –perhaps even proto-Kantian– conception of freedom and responsibility as linked and grounded in a subjectively sufficient representation of the possibility of our own absolute moral worth. This could not be clearer, I think, than it is in *De visione Dei* 7.25-26:

O domine, suavitas omnis dulcedinis, posuisti in libertate mea, ut sim, si voluero, mei ipsius. Hinc nisi sim mei ipsius, tu non es meus. Necessitates enim libertatem, cum tu non possis esse meus, nisi et ego sim mei ipsius. Et quia hoc posuisti in libertate mea, non me necessitas, sed exspectas, ut ego eligam mei ipsius esse. Per me igitur stat, non per te, domine, qui non contrahis bonitatem tuam maximam, sed largissime effundis in omnes capaces.... Tu me doces, ut sensus oboediat rationi et ratio dominetur. Quando igitur sensus servit rationi, sum mei ipsius. Sed non habet ratio, unde dirigatur, nisi per te, domine, qui es verbum et ratio rationum. Unde nunc video, si audiero verbum tuum, quod in me loqui non cessat et continue lucet in ratione, ero mei ipsius, liber et non servus peccati.

¹⁰ Is it going too far to say that time is an instrument of the soul and that the most important function of this instrument is its relationship to our ethical condition? In any case, see *De venatione sapientiae* 37.108 concerning the notion that no created being can realize all of its possibilities in a single moment in time; the example that Nicholas uses is Plato, who, according to Nicholas, does not maximize the nature of man. For Nicholas, of course, only Christ is the contracted maximum, but Christ is not created in same the sense in which the unfolded world is created.



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(O Lord, the Sweetness of every delight, you have placed within my freedom that I be of my own if I am willing. Hence, unless I am my own, you are not mine, for you would [compel] my freedom since you cannot be mine unless I also am mine. And since you have placed this in my freedom, you do not [compel] me, but you wait for me to choose to be my own. This depends on me and not on you, O Lord, for you do not limit your maximum goodness but lavish it on all who are able to receive it... You teach me that sense should obey reason and that reason should be lord and master. When, therefore, sense serves reason, I am my own. [But one does not have reason from which one is directed] except through you, O Lord, who are the Word and the Reason of reasons. I see now that if I listen to your Word, which does not cease to speak in me and which continually shines forth in my reason, I will be my own, free and not the slave of sin.) [my emendations]

So, in short, it seems significant to me that we find in Nicholas' understanding of divine providence the kind of historical thinking that appears to resemble the philosophies of history at work in Kant and Hegel. I don't mean to suggest that Nicholas directly informs these projects; no one has demonstrated to my satisfaction that Nicholas was especially influential on the major thinkers associated with what is called "modern philosophy".

However, unless we are to believe that what we call modern philosophy is constituted by a *sui generis* revolution in human thinking (which may –ironically in this context– be possible on Nicholas' own view¹¹), a thinker like Nicholas may nevertheless serve as a barometer of transformations in the Renaissance intellectual climate that are constitutive of modern philosophy's historical emergence.

Let me therefore end with an offering to the possibility of future discussion and judgment: the two quotations below seem to me to suggest an interesting parallel between Nicholas and Kant on the question of the relationship between the church-militant and the church-triumphant as images that are both related to the critical horizon of human reason with respect to the question of its fundamental ethical condition.

¹¹ *Idiota de mente* 6.88: "Nescio, an Pythagoricus vel alius sim. Hoc scio, quod nullius auctoritas me ducit, etiamsi me movere tentet." ("I don't know whether I am a Pythagorean or something else. But I do know that no one's authority guides me, even if it attempts to influence me.")



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[1] Nam omnis creatura rationalis, in natura humana rationali per gratiam in Christo Iesu divinitati hypostaticae unita, gratiam elevationis ad unionem dei, quae est ultima felicitas, consequi potest.... Sunt autem homines rationales peregrinantes in spe salvationis, quibus revelata est veritas huius gratiae per Christi incarnationem. Et hii quidem in fide sunt veritatem agnoscentes et in spe expectantes felicitatem medio caritatis; qui militantem constituunt ecclesiam, quae omnia habet per gratiam Iesu Christi quae adhuc sunt necessaria, ut post militiam in triumphantem transcendat et beatitudinem in Iesu Christo consequatur. Haec quidem ecclesia est, in qua est gratia Iesu explicata secundum istius mundi participantem naturam, quia, cum non possit corruptibilis homo veritatem intueri ob suae naturae condicionem sine aenigmate et speculo, saltem ipsam in aenigmate et speculo seu fide attingat.

(For in rational human nature, every rational creature hypostatically united to divinity by grace in Christ Jesus can attain the grace of elevation to union with God, which is the ultimate happiness.... There are rational men, however, wayfarers in hope of salvation, to whom the truth of this grace was revealed through the incarnation of Christ; and these indeed are the men who, acknowledging the truth through faith and awaiting in hope the happiness which comes through charity, make up the Church Militant, which through the grace of Jesus Christ has all things necessary for this, so that, after its military service, it may pass over to the Church Triumphant and find blessedness in Jesus Christ. This is the Church in which the grace of Jesus is unfolded according to the participatory nature of this world, because, although corruptible man, on account of the condition of his nature, cannot understand the truth without enigma and mirror image, at least he touches it through enigma and mirror image, or faith).¹²

[2] Das Himmelreich wird zuletzt auch, was die Leitung der Vorsehung betrifft, in dieser Geschichte nicht allein als in einer zwar zu gewissen Zeiten verweilten, aber nie ganz unterbrochenen Annäherung, sondern auch in seinem Eintritte vorgestellt.... Der angeführte Zusatz zur Geschichte der Kirche, der das künftige und letzte Schicksal derselben betrifft, stellt diese nun endlich als *triumphierend*, d.i. nach allen überwundenen Hindernissen als mit Glückseligkeit noch hier auf Erden bekrönt vor.... Diese Vorstellung einer Geschichtserzählung der Nachwelt, die selbst keine Geschichte ist, ist ein schönes Ideal der durch Einführung der wahren allgemeinen Religion bewirkten moralischen, im Glauben *vorangesehenen* Weltepoche, bis zu ihrer Vollendung, die wir nicht als empirische Vollendung *absehen*, sondern auf die wir nur im kontinuierlichen Fortschreiten und Annäherung zum höchsten auf Erden möglichen Guten...*hinaussehen*.

¹² Nicholas of Cusa, Letter to Rodrigo Sánchez de Arévalo (May 20, 1442), § 2-3; trans. Thomas IZBICKI in *Nicholas of Cusa: Writings on Church and Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).



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(As regards its guidance by Providence, the Kingdom of Heaven is finally represented in this history not only as coming nearer, in an approach delayed indeed at certain times yet never entirely interrupted, but as being ushered in as well.... The addition to the history of the church that deals with its future final destiny represents it, however, as finally *triumphant*, i.e., as crowned with happiness here on earth, after having overcome all obstacles.... This representation in a historical narrative of the future world, which is not itself history, is a beautiful ideal of the moral world-epoch brought about by the introduction of the true universal religion and *foreseen* in faith in its completion —one which we do not *see directly* in the manner of an empirical completion, but *have a glimpse of* in the continuous advance and approximation toward the highest possible good on earth.).¹³

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¹³ *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*, pp. 134-136 in *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6; trans. Allen WOOD and George di GIOVANNI in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (Cambridge, 1998).

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