Performative Finitude: Theological Language and the God–World Relationship in Nicholas of Cusa's *De Non Aliud*

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Abstract: In *Christ the Heart of Creation*, Rowan Williams regrets that he cannot explore Nicholas of Cusa's 'uniquely lucid insights' concerning the relationship between God and the world. This article takes up the challenge, enquiring how Cusanus approaches this relationship in his treatise *De Non Aliud*. First, the article attends to how Cusanus understands theological language, arguing that he invites his readers into a self-reflective process, taking seriously the finite mode of our knowing and speaking. Secondly, it is shown how this same attention to human finitude, and to the performative aspect of attempting to understand a relationship which defines our very being, is evident in Cusanus' approach to theological metaphysics.

The well-known discourses about alterity and difference in continental philosophy – Lévinas, Derrida and beyond[1] – should not detract from the fact that Christian theology has its own contribution to offer in a reconsideration of otherness. If, as Wolfhart Pannenberg wrote, otherness is 'the generative

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1 For instance: Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), English translation: Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978); Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966), English translation: Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London and New York: Routledge, 1973); Emmanuel Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être, ou, Au-delà de l'essence* (La Haye: M. Nijhoff, 1974), English translation: Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (London: Kluwer, 1997); François Laruelle, *Les philosophies de la différence: introduction critique* (Paris: PUF, 1986), English translation: François Laruelle, *Philosophies of Difference: A Critical Introduction to Non-Philosophy*, trans. Rocco Gangle (London: Continuum, 2010).

principle of the great diversity of created reality',[2] then this aligns otherness with createdness and finitude, whereas God as the uncreated and infinite would be associated with unity and simplicity. However, as transcendent, God is also beyond the sheer dualities of plurality and unity, otherness and simplicity. This is what Christian theology expresses both when it suggests that God is *totaliter aliter* – totally other than any creature – and when it holds that God is not other than creatures, as Ian McFarland has shown.[3]

That God is not other than creation was first systematically developed by the fifteenth-century cardinal Nicholas of Cusa in his 1462 treatise *De Non Aliud*.[4] In the wake of the wider debates about alterity and difference mentioned above, it does not come as a surprise that this treatise has had a warm reception in the second half of the twentieth century, both in theology and in philosophy. For instance, it was given some prominence in the work of the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar[5] and in the phenomenology of the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka[6] – not to mention some substantive contributions in German-speaking Cusa scholarship.[7]

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2 'Die Andersheit lässt sich . . . als das generative Prinzip der Mannigfaltigkeit der geschöpflichen Wirklichkeit auffassen'. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie: Band 2* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), p. 43 (translation mine).

3 Ian A. McFarland, 'The Gift of the *Non aliud*: Creation from Nothing as a Metaphysics of Abundance', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21 (2019), pp. 44–58.

4 In the classic Heidelberg edition, *Directio speculantis seu de non aliud* appeared as volume 13, edited by Ludwig Baur and Paul Wilpert (Hamburg: Meiner, 1944). This text is freely available online at www.cusanus-portal.de. A newer edition, taking into account more textual variants, was published together with a German translation and a set of thematic essays as Klaus Reinhardt, Jorge M. Machetta and Harald Schwaetzer, eds., *De non aliud: Nichts anderes [Übersetzung, textkritischer Apparat sowie thematische Erläuterungen]* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2011). As for an easily accessible English translation, see Nicholas of Cusa, *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*, trans. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: A. J. Banning Press, 2001), also freely accessible online at http://jasper-hopkins.info.

5 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit: eine theologische Ästhetik (Band III,1: Im Raum der Metaphysik)* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1961), pp. 552–92, English translation: Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol 5, *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), pp. 205–46.

6 Cf. Filip Karfík, 'Die Welt als das non aliud: Zu Patočkas Projekt einer asubjektiven Phänomenologie', in *Unendlichwerden durch die Endlichkeit: eine Lektüre der Philosophie Jan Patočkas* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2008), pp. 55–68.

7 Gerda von Bredow, 'Gott der Nichtandere', *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 73 (1965), pp. 15–22; Gerhard Schneider, *Gott, das Nichtandere: Untersuchungen zum metaphysischen Grunde bei Nikolaus von Kues* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1970); Engelbert Gutwenger, 'Das "Nichtandere" bei Nikolaus von Kues', in Nikolaus Grass, ed., *Cusanus Gedächtnisschrift* (Innsbruck and Münich: Universitätsverlag Wagner, 1970), pp. 17–22; Werner Beierwaltes, 'Cusanus und Proklos zum neuplatonischen Ursprung des non aliud', in *Nicolò Cusano agli inizi del mondo moderno* (Florence: Sansoni, 1970), pp. 137–40; Egil A. Wyller, 'Zum Begriff "non-aliud" bei Cusanus', in *Nicolò Cusano agli inizi del mondo moderno* (Florence: Sansoni, 1970), pp. 419–43; Detlev Pätzold, *Einheit und Andersheit: Die Bedeutung kategorialer Neubildungen in der Philosophie des Nicolaus Cusanus* (Cologne: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1981); and Paul Bolberitz, *Philosophischer Gottesbegriff bei Nikolaus Cusanus in seinem Werk 'De non aliud'* (Leipzig: St Benno-Verlag, 1989).

More recently, Rowan Williams noted in the preface to his *Christ the Heart of Creation* that Nicholas of Cusa, and his *non aliud* in particular, 'contributes some uniquely lucid insights' about an asymmetrical but non-competitive relationship between God and the world which Williams regrets not to pursue in his book on the same topic.[8] This article proposes to take up this *desideratum* by focusing on what unique insights Cusanus can offer with regard to a non-competitive understanding of the God–world relationship. It will do so by first attending to Cusanus' approach to the limits and characteristics of theological language, as laid out in the treatise *De Non Aliud*. As we will see, rather than speaking about God in a static or abstract way, Cusanus invites his readers into a self-reflective process, taking seriously the finite mode of knowing and speaking typical for created beings. This same attention to the human finite mode of understanding, and to the performative aspect of attempting to understand a relationship which defines our very being, is equally evident in Cusanus' approach to theological metaphysics.

In focusing on theological language and the God–world relationship, this article also wishes to continue a scholarly conversation about how to understand *De Non Aliud* which emerged in the past decade.[9] There has been some ongoing disagreement in both these areas, and I wish to suggest that a focus on the performativity invited by the treatise suggests a way forward in each case. In all of this, I will moreover be drawing on more recent German scholarship which has not so far been received in the English-speaking world.[10]

De Non Aliud first of all raises the hermeneutical question of how it wishes to be read. Is it Cusanus' aim to propose a definition of definitions through a clever word-play, which then serves as a novel name for God? In the first part of this article, I will argue that his intention was not primarily to propose a statically nominal descriptor for the Divine, but to propose a dynamic way in which to conform one's thinking and one's language to the Absolute, as is suggested by another title of the same treatise, *De Directione Speculantis*. This dynamic and performative aspect of *De Non Aliud* and its contribution to a theological understanding of language has often been overlooked. What Cusanus does in *De Non Aliud* is not only speaking about

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8   Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. xiv.
9   Clyde Lee Miller, 'God as *Li Non-Aliud*: Nicholas of Cusa's Unique Designation for God', *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 41 (2015), pp. 24–40; Vojtěch Hladký, 'The Concept Non Aliud in the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa', *Acta Comeniana* 30 (2016), pp. 9–61; Johannes Stoffers, 'Nicholas Cusanus and His 'Non-Aliud' as Concept of God', *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11 (2019), pp. 39–60; and McFarland, 'The Gift of the *Non aliud*'.
10   In particular, the various articles in Reinhardt, Machetta, and Schwaetzer, *De non aliud*: *Nichts anderes*, as well as Harald Schwaetzer, 'Non aliud quam docta ignorantia: Wegmarken einer Transzendentalphilosophie des Transzendenten bei Nikolaus von Kues', *Das Mittelalter* 19 (2014), pp. 34–60.

theological language, but making his point performatively. *Non aliud* is in this sense a Cusan 'enigma', a direction for a movement of thought which can point beyond the finite towards the infinite, and not just a statically understood divine name, as has often been assumed.

This hermeneutical approach is mirrored in the innovative way Cusanus proposes to consider the God–world relationship in *De Non Aliud*, as we will see in the second part of this article. While old and recent commentators have suggested that the claim that God is 'not other' is either a doorway to pantheism, an implicit acknowledgement of the univocity of being, or a sign of a 'dialectical' quality of Cusanus' theology, I will argue that neither is the case. Rather, Cusanus stands within the analogical and participatory metaphysical tradition, which he creatively develops. In particular, he is careful to take into account and bring to the fore the epistemological entanglement characteristic to human knowers who wish to enquire about their relationship to the transcendent.

The hermeneutics of *non aliud*: Cusanus' performative approach to theological language

Even a cursory reading of *De Non Aliud* reveals that one of Cusanus' key interests in this treatise lies in finding a principle of principles and in naming it. Transposed into a theological key, this means he is searching for a name of God. Nevertheless, it is only partly accurate to say that Cusanus wishes to propose that 'the Not Other' or 'that which is not other' is a fitting name for God, or for the principle of principles. As I will demonstrate, Cusanus does not simply propose a new name for the Divine, but taking his cue from Pseudo-Dionysius, whose thought is a major inspiration for *De Non Aliud*,[11] Cusanus considers the very possibility of theological language. He radicalizes the *via eminentiae* by not only ascribing any perfections primarily and pre-eminently to God, but by performatively realizing that the very movement of thought is upheld by the Divine. Cusanus achieves this by focusing on the dynamic process of thinking and speaking about God, and does so in two distinct but related ways. On the one hand, *De Non Aliud* as a whole presents itself less as a record of a discovery (of a new divine name) than as a handbook or direction for those who wish to discover and contemplate divine names for themselves. On the other hand, the central insight of *non aliud* is that it makes it possible for something to come into focus which is often overlooked, namely, the process and dynamics of thought itself.

First, then, what hermeneutical approach does *De Non Aliud* invite? How does the treatise wish to be read? The dialogue opens with Nicholas insisting that 'deep mysteries' can be found everywhere.[12] In his search for them, he begins by enquiring for the possibility of a kind of master-definition which defines

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11 Cf. *De Non Aliud* I, n. 5.
12 *De Non Aliud* I, n. 1: 'undique circa profunda mysteria occupamur'.

everything, including itself. Reaching such a definition would mean a significant advance on the path to knowledge, because definitions are, as Cusanus says, 'what make us know in the first place'.[13] Cusanus here speaks the language of his conversation partner in the first part of the treatise, Ferdinand, who is an Aristotelian. He shares the Aristotelian tenet that definitions are the beginning of knowledge, but goes beyond Aristotle in guiding Ferdinand's attention to an element of the definition which can easily be overlooked.[14] Ferdinand, when asked whether he sees that 'the definition which defines everything is not other than what is defined?'[15] agrees, but does not immediately grasp that what Cusanus is after is the adjectival structure 'not other than' or *non aliud quam*. Together with the copula *esse*, this adjectival structure can be meaningfully applied to anything in the world as it refers to itself: a raindrop *est non aliud quam* a raindrop, and justice *est non aliud quam* justice. In English, we might express this by saying that a raindrop *is nothing else than* a raindrop, or that justice *is not other than* justice. Rather than seeing in sentences like these mere tautologies, the first step of Cusanus' argument is to focus on the grammatical qualifier 'not other than', and playfully to suggest that it seems to provide something like a master-definition that can define everything.

In a second step, Cusanus explores how this seeming master-definition is in fact also self-defining. This can be seen when the adjectival structure *non aliud quam* is not taken as a qualifier, but as the subject of the very definition it provides: 'Not-other is not other than Not-other'.[16] As Jasper Hopkins has pointed out, the earliest Latin codices added a *li* to the title of the present work: *De Li Non Aliud*. The uncommon word *li*, in its occurrence with *non aliud*, indicates that *non aliud* is functioning not as a connective adjectival structure, but as the subject.[17] Once he has seen the significance of *non aliud quam*, Ferdinand begins to understand what captivates Cusanus, namely, that here we have a 'definition which defines itself and everything that is to be defined'.[18] The aging Cusanus, we are told, is visibly rejuvenated when

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13 *De Non Aliud* I, n. 3: 'est, quod nos apprime facit scire'.
14 It will become clear later in the treatise that for Cusanus, the limits of Aristotelian philosophy are that the Stagirite did not go beyond reason and the immanent realm to search for the principle of principles, in which opposites coincide, and which, for Cusanus, cannot be known rationally, but only glimpsed intellectually. Cf. *De Non Aliud* XVII–XIX, especially n. 86. See also the excellent analysis of Martin D'Ascenzo, 'Aristoteles', in Reinhardt, Machetta and Schwaetzer, *De non aliud: Nichts anderes*, pp. 285–90.
15 *De Non Aliud* I, n. 3: 'Vides igitur definitionem omnia definientem esse non aliud quam definitum?'
16 *De Non Aliud* I, n. 4: 'Non-aliud est non aliud quam non aliud'.
17 Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on God as Not-Other: A Translation and an Appraisal of De Li Non Aliud* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), pp. 19–20.
18 *De Non Aliud* I, n. 4: 'Quodsi toto nisu mentis aciem ad li non-aliud convertis, mecum ipsum definitionem se et omnia definientem videbis'.

thinking and talking about this 'most precise and most true' mode of defining.[19]

Still, Cusanus' interest in *De non aliud* does not concern definitions per se, but how such a definition of definitions may help us think about and know God. How so? As Cusanus stresses right at the outset of *De Docta Ignorantia*,[20] apprehending new knowledge necessarily proceeds by comparison with what is already known. This epistemological principle, when applied to the Divine, means that gaining knowledge about God is complex. For if God created everything that is and sustains it, there can be nothing 'outside' God which could provide the epistemological foundation from which the unknown could be reached by way of comparison. As Cusanus has Ferdinand say:

> Since there is not anything prior to the First and since the First is independent of everything posterior, assuredly it is defined only through itself. But since what is originated has nothing from itself but has from the Beginning whatever it is, assuredly the Beginning is the ground of being, or the definition, of what is originated.[21]

This is, then, where Cusanus' interest in definitions comes in: as the absolute, God defines both Godself and everything else. Like a self-defining definition, God can only be known through Godself. It is in this sense that not-other serves as a pathway towards knowing God.

Nevertheless, Cusanus does not straightforwardly see not-other as a name for God. Explicitly reflecting on the naming power of *non-aliud*, he tells us that it is 'not that name of God which is before every name'. Rather, it relates to that name as the path which directs a pilgrim to a city relates to the name of that city.[22] Cusanus is very nuanced here. While he knows that many names are attributed to the first principle, he stresses that none of them can be adequate to it 'since it is the beginning of all names as well as of all things'.[23] Indeed, since *not other* 'precedes all things', it also precedes all names, making it 'unnameable'

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19 *De Non Aliud* I, n. 2: 'videris iuvenescere'. *De Non Aliud* I, n. 5: 'hic definiendi modus, quo non-aliud se et omnia definit, praecisissimus sit atque verissimus'.

20 *De Docta Ignorantia* I, 1, n. 2: 'Omnes autem investigantes in comparatione praesuppositi certi proportionabiliter incertum iudicant; comparativa igitur est omnis inquisitio, medio proportionis utens'.

21 *De Non Aliud* II, n. 6: 'Cum primo non sit prius, sitque ab omnibus posterioribus absolutum, utique non nisi per semet ipsum definitur. Principiatum vero cum a se nihil, sed, quidquid est, habeat a principio, profecto principium est ratio essendi eius seu definitio'.

22 *De Non Aliud* II, n. 7: 'non sit nomen Dei, quod est ante omne nomen in caelo et terra nominabile, sicut via peregrinantem ad civitatem dirigens non est nomen civitatis'.

23 *De Non Aliud* II, n. 6: '[P]rimo principio multa attribuantur nomina, quorum nullum ei adaequatum esse potest, cum sit etiam nominum omnium sicut et rerum principium'.

in itself.[24] Later on in the dialogue, when in conversation with Abbot John Andrea, Cusanus again clarifies that he does not mean that 'Not other' is 'the name of that whose name is above every name'. Rather, through 'Not other' he discloses the most fitting name he can think of for his concept of the unnameable.[25]

Acknowledging, therefore, that we have to designate the unnameable somehow, Cusanus establishes a criterion for distinguishing more or less fitting or adequate 'names'. This criterion is the degree to which a name *directs* the human mind or 'vision' towards the first principle.[26] As with the example of the road to the city which is not the city itself, the crucial function of any naming of the unnameable is to direct the seeker towards that which ultimately cannot be known, as can be seen from the marked clustering of the verb *dirigere* in first chapters of the treatise.[27] Names, as inadequate as they may be to describe the unnameable, nevertheless serve as a pathway towards the first principle.[28]

This is relevant for the way in which *De Non Aliud* as a whole wants to be read. For if Cusanus believes that any name which can be given to the Divine is more of a pathway towards that which is unspeakable than a description thereof, then the same must be true for the scope of his own writings about divine names. They would have to be more like a roadmap drawn up by one who has travelled some roads and wishes to share his knowledge with fellow travellers, than like a definitive record of his findings. This indeed resonates with one of the titles of the treatise (*De directione speculantis*, a guidance to the one who contemplates[29]) and with the summary statement about the treatise given by Abbot John Andrea in its last paragraph: the abbot promises that the interlocutors will now stop questioning Cusanus about *non aliud*, since they 'find to be sufficient the guidance (*directio*) by which you have endeavoured to guide (*dirigere*) us to the beginning, which defines itself and all things'.[30]

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24 *De Non Aliud* X, n. 36: '[I]psum non-aliud [est] innominabile, quia nullum nomen ad ipsum attingit, cum omnia praecedat'.

25 *De Non Aliud* XXII, n. 99: '[I]psum non-aliud non dico equidem illius nomen, cuius est super omne nomen nuncupatio. Sed de ipso primo conceptus mei nomen per ipsum non-aliud tibi patefacio; neque mihi praecisius occurrit conceptum meum exprimens nomen de innominabili'.

26 *De Non Aliud* II, n. 6: 'humanum visum rectius in primum dirigere'.

27 Cf. e.g. *De Non Aliud* II, n. 6: 'alia omnia . . . non dirigunt in principium'; *De Non Aliud* II, n. 7: 'sicut via peregrinantem ad civitatem dirigens'.

28 *De Non Aliud* II, n. 7: 'viam nobis servire ad principium'.

29 On the history of the few extant manuscripts of this treatise, including its title, see Klaus Reinhardt, 'Zur Überlieferung des Textes', in Reinhardt, Machetta and Schwaetzer, *De non aliud: Nichts anderes*, pp. 25–31; and earlier: Klaus Reinhardt, 'Eine bisher unbekannte Handschrift mit Werken des Nikolaus von Kues in der Kapitelbibliothek von Toledo', *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft* 17 (1986), pp. 96–141.

30 *De Non Aliud* XXIV, n. 113: 'Sufficit enim nobis directio tua, qua non nisus es dirigere ad ipsum principium, quod sese et omnia definit'.

Cusanus' approach is therefore one of guidance or manuduction. One of the advantages of such a method is that it allows him to combine a more reasoned approach with a more contemplative one – something he attempts to do in most of his works.[31] He appeals both to the reader's reason, but also aims to lead the reader beyond reason to an intellectual and contemplative vision. In order to do so, and to share his own intellectual and contemplative vision, Cusanus must use words and rely on their signification, as he acknowledges in chapter 2: 'each of us can reveal his own vision to the other only by means of the signification of words'.[32] The signification of *non aliud* is, then, one such attempt of the Cusan to share something of his own insights on naming the first principle using the signification of words.

What, however, is the signification of *non aliud*? Crucially, it brings to attention the process of thinking which otherwise remains invisible in language. As such, it is what Cusanus calls an enigma. In the words of Gerda von Bredow, this is how philosophical names for God want to be understood in the work of the Cusan: 'They are not fixed notions, but rather directions for a movement of thought; formulae for a process of thought which is not meant to offer a result outside of this process'.[33] What does this mean for *De Non Aliud*? As Harald Schwaetzer puts it, the key point of the *non aliud* is to make visible an invisible precondition for all defining, namely the process of thinking itself. In the process of thinking, thinking itself, the *how*, goes mostly unobserved, because thinking is directed towards a *what* beyond itself.[34] When we say that a raindrop is nothing other than a raindrop, then we might see an empty tautology in this sentence. However, with Cusanus, we might also direct our attention to the 'nothing other than' insofar as it describes the process of thinking. Here it becomes evident what this formula achieves: it makes it possible, linguistically, for the notion of a raindrop to have some stability over time. In thinking 'raindrop' twice, not statically, but in a movement from raindrop to raindrop, as 'nothing other' demands, I recognize that by this very movement of thought, the two thoughts are not really two,

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31 As Meredith Ziebart has shown, however, in the eyes of his contemporaries, Cusanus was only partly successful in doing so, given that he was accused of both abandoning all reason (for instance by Johannes Wenck), and of being excessively rational (by some of his more mystically oriented monastic interlocutors). See K. Meredith Ziebart, *Nicolaus Cusanus on Faith and the Intellect: A Case Study in 15th-Century Fides-Ratio Controversy* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014).

32 *De Non Aliud* II, n. 7: 'Nos autem alter alteri suam non possimus revelare visionem nisi per vocabulorum significatum'.

33 My translation of '[D]ie philosophischen Gottesnamen . . . sind keine festen Begriffe, sondern Anweisungen für eine Bewegung des Denkens, Formeln für einen Denkvollzug, der nicht ein von ihm ablösbares Resultat schaffen soll' (Bredow, 'Gott der Nichtandere', p. 16.)

34 Cf. Harald Schwaetzer, 'Einführung in "De non aliud" und Einordnung ins Gesamtwerk', in Reinhardt, Machetta and Schwaetzer, *De non aliud: Nichts anderes*, p. 12.

but one and the same. There is hence nothing banal about this sentence. It seems tautological only when read statically. Put differently, *non aliud* is not the content of any notion, but the hidden process which makes notions into notions. Focusing on *non aliud* enables one to recognize a movement which is not itself the content of any notion. In this sense, it is like a perfect mirror, not reflecting itself, but making itself invisible so as to show forth the respective notion which is the content of the thought.[35] In short, *non aliud* is a precise way of capturing the process of thinking on a linguistic level.[36]

Notably, Cusanus' focus is so much on the dynamic character of the process that he attempts to avoid turning *non aliud* into a static noun. By contrast, whenever we write 'the not-other', we are turning the Cusan 'not other' into a noun, rather unlike the linguistic construction Cusanus used to express the process and dynamics of thinking. Similarly, to say that *non aliud* is a name of God because it defines everything, including itself, is strictly speaking misleading, because such a sentence leaves behind the processual character of *non aliud*, instead making it into a static noun of a name for God.[37] It is at this point where Clyde Miller, who writes that 'calling the Creator "the Not-Other"' is to propose 'an original name for reaching toward the infinite God', needs to be nuanced.[38] Insofar as it underemphasizes the crucial processual character of 'not other', it is misleading to speak of '*the* Not-Other' as a static name for God.

So far, we have seen that Cusanus' focus lies on the movement of the one who seeks, both on the macro-level of the treatise as a whole, and on the micro-level of the way he sees *non aliud* as an enigma. It remains to be shown how this double concern with process is an effect of Cusanus' interest in the role and limits of language when speaking about the Divine.

For Cusanus, 'not other' is the linguistic expression of the formal principle which he had discovered and described in *De Docta Ignorantia*[39] insofar as it reaches towards transcendence 'before' the separation of affirmation and negation. God is not only said to be not other, but in fact to be not defined by otherness or sameness *tout court*. To see God in this sense prior to affirmation and negation, Cusanus summarizes, means to 'see that, in the affirmations which we make about God, God is not a negation which is affirmed but is the

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35 For the comparison with a perfect mirror, see Schwaetzer, 'Non aliud quam docta ignorantia', p. 56.
36 Because *non aliud* is a so much more fruitful and clear enigma than anything that had been revealed to him before, Cusanus holds, he is hopeful that God will some day reveal himself without enigmata. Cf *De Non Aliud* V, 17: 'Nam quo pacto mihi se visibilem praestiterit, in libellis pluribus legere potuisti: nunc autem in hoc aenigmate significati ipsius non-aliud . . . fecundius et clarius, adeo ut sperare queam ipsum Deum sese nobis aliquando sine aenigmatte revelaturum'.
37 Cf. on this Schwaetzer, 'Non aliud quam docta ignorantia', p. 57.
38 Miller, 'God as *Li Non-Aliud*', p. 28.
39 Cf. e.g. *De Docta Ignorantia* I, ch. 4, n. 11 and ch. 22 n. 67.

affirmation of affirmation'.[40] In thus expressing the pre-eminence of God, Cusanus follows Pseudo-Dionysius,[41] who, in *On the Divine Names*, calls God 'over-good' and 'over-being' (*hyper*) or 'pre-good' and 'pre-being' (*pro*) to express that the perfections of all creatures are comprehended and anticipated by their creator to an infinite degree of intensity. Such a *via eminentiae* also applies to language in the sense that it is the stability of the divine perfections which renders finite language meaningful. Cusanus builds on this insight and takes it radically serious in two related ways.

First, in the enigma of *non aliud* Cusanus not only speaks about how God continually upholds the possibility of human language being meaningful, but enigmatically performs it. If, as we have seen, 'not other' is like a perfect mirror which is itself invisible in order to reveal the notion it speaks of, then the way 'not other' relates to a linguistic notion is an image for how God relates to all language. Put differently, 'not other' captures dynamically and on a linguistic level how the possibility of meaning in finite language is always sustained by God. In 'not other', therefore, language itself analogically mirrors the pre-eminence of God, in the way it enables and stabilizes the process of thought: the possibility of language is premised on the fact that a thought can be sustained over time as not other than this very thought, and this serves as a performative analogy for how God is the condition of the possibility of any meaning in language at all. By employing such a performative analogy, Cusanus performs linguistically what he aims to express about the use of theological language. What is remarkable about this is how Cusanus' approach is firmly rooted in what is knowable from within the finite realm, where that which transcends this realm is seen *per speculum in aenigmate* – through a mirror, in an enigma – as the Pauline verse quoted so often by Cusanus has it (1 Cor. 13:12). This, then, is Cusanus' second radicalization of the *via eminentiae*: like Dionysius, Cusanus knows that the infinite perfection of God lies *beyond* finite language, but radicalizing this very insight, he refuses to posit anything about the infinite which cannot be said, enigmatically, from within the realm of finite language. To be sure, finite language is brought almost to breaking point in doing so, as the puzzlement of Cusanus' conversation partner in the opening chapters of *De Non Aliud*, which is shared by many of its readers, shows.

In sum, as we have seen, *De Non Aliud* wants to be read not primarily as a treatise suggesting a new name for God, but as guidance for those who wish to think and speak fittingly about the transcendent. In this sense, the work offers an important and innovative contribution to understandings of theological language. By making visible the process of thought which otherwise remains invisible, *non aliud* is, for Cusanus, an enigma or dark mirror image for how God continually sustains meaning in language. While this approach is in continuity

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40 *De Non Aliud*, Propositio 14, n. 119: 'Qui Deum videt ante affirmationem et negationem, ille Deum videt in affirmationibus, quae de ipso per nos fiunt, non esse negativam, quae affirmatur, sed affirmationis affirmationem'.

41 Cf. *De Non Aliud* VI, n. 21.

with Dionysius' *via eminentiae*, it also radicalizes it: Because it focuses on processuality and performativity, it stays within the realm of what is utterable and knowable in finite human language, thereby turning language itself into an *enigma* by means of *non aliud*.

The metaphysics of *non aliud*: Considering the God–world relationship from within finitude

Based on the hermeneutics of *De Non Aliud* outlined in the previous section, we shall now turn to some metaphysical implications of *non aliud*. What does it mean for understanding the Creator–creature relationship if God is believed to be 'not other'? This question has been a live issue not only among recent commentators, but is in fact already present in Johannes Wenck's critique of Cusanus' work in his own time.[42] Wenck accused Cusanus of supporting pantheism. More recently, the question has sometimes also been advanced in the form of whether Cusanus subscribes directly or implicitly to a univocity of being.

As we will see, Cusanus' understanding of the God–world relationship as proposed in *De Non Aliud* does not amount to him agreeing directly or indirectly with pantheism or a univocity of being. Rather, it is determined by his specific notion of the finite realm as characterized by alterity or otherness, which however reflects something of the not-otherness of God. It is in this sense that Cusanus creatively reformulates analogical reasoning. Importantly, moreover, the hermeneutic caveat not to overstep what can be known from within finitude, which we saw above, also influences the way Cusanus considers the human epistemological position from which to consider the God–world relationship.

It may seem odd that Cusanus chose the somewhat roundabout *non aliud* (not other) to make his point, instead of *idem* (the same). Just as one can say that not other is not other than not other, so one could affirm that the same is the same as the same (*idem est idem ac idem*).[43] It would seem, at first glance, that something which is not other than another thing is ultimately the same as that thing. However, if this were true, and if God was 'not other' than creation, then this would predicate a form of sameness between Creator and creature, which would leave Cusanus' work open to the accusation of pantheism. Cusanus was aware of this, and in *De Venatione Sapientiae*, written a couple of years after *De Non Aliud*, explicitly rules out an identification of *non aliud* with sameness: 'Notice that *not other* does not signify as much as does *same*. Rather, since same is not other than same, not other precedes it and all nameable things'.[44]

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42 Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Debate with John Wenck: A Translation and Appraisal of De Ignota Litteratura and Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* (Minneapolis: A. J. Banning Press, 1981).

43 Cf. Schwaetzer, 'Einführung in 'De non aliud' und Einordnung ins Gesamtwerk', p. 21.

44 *De Venatione Sapientiae* ch. XIV, n. 41: 'Advertas autem, quomodo li non aliud non significat tantum sicut li idem. Sed cum idem sit non aliud quam idem, non aliud ipsum et omnia, quae nominari possunt, praecedit'.

As Louis Dupré rightly notes, the problem with sameness, for Cusanus, is that it is a 'univocal category that allows no distinction between complicated and explicated Being'.[45] Complication and explication – or enfolding and unfolding – are categories Cusanus introduced in *De Docta Ignorantia* to describe how God as oneness is unfolded in all finite things participating in him, so that the universe is an explicated infinity, or – seen from the other perspective – that everything is complicated or enfolded in God.[46] This terminology is Cusanus' early attempt to express the relationship of qualitative difference between the Divine Being and created being. His terminology is innovative; he does not, for instance, explicitly take recourse to the Thomist language of analogy, even though many commentators have argued that his thinking is fundamentally analogical nevertheless.[47]

In the context of *non aliud*, the question is whether 'not other' is another innovative expression of a metaphysical relationship characterized by a qualitative ontological difference between creation and the Creator, or whether the language of 'not other' ultimately amounts to a kind of ontological sameness, even if this was not originally intended by Cusanus. Nancy Hudson seems to believe the latter, writing: 'When God is called 'Not-other', the identification between him and creation is clearly indicated'.[48] If 'identification' is understood as indicating a sameness, as it usually does, then this interpretation clearly fails to take into account Cusanus' own qualification of *non aliud* in *De Apice Theoriae* seen above.

Instead of ascribing a sheer identity between God and creation to Cusanus, some commentators contend that *De Non Aliud* both implies an ontological sameness and an ontological difference between God and creatures. For instance, Simon Burton argues based on Cusanus' remark that 'God is neither the sky nor other than the sky',[49] that for Cusanus, God is 'both radically univocal and radically equivocal with his creation'.[50] This echoes Miller's dialectical

45 Louis Dupré, 'Nature and Grace in Nicholas of Cusa's Mystical Philosophy', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 64 (1990), p. 160.
46 See on this Knut Alfsvåg, '*Explicatio* and *Complicatio*: On the Understanding of the Relationship between God and the World in the Work of Nicholas Cusanus', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 14 (2012), pp. 295–309.
47 This is argued throughout in the work of Rudolf Haubst, for instance in Rudolf Haubst, 'Nikolaus von Kues auf den Spuren des Thomas von Aquin', *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft* 5 (1965), pp. 15–62. For newer arguments to the same effect, see Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013); and Markus Führer, *Echoes of Aquinas in Cusanus's Vision of Man* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014).
48 Nancy J. Hudson, *Becoming God: The Doctrine of Theosis in Nicholas of Cusa* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), p. 53.
49 *De Non Aliud* XXII, n. 103: 'Ipsum nec caelum, nec a caelo aliud esse'.
50 Simon Burton, 'Exploring a Scholastic Terra Incognita: Univocity, Analogy and Infinity in Nicholas of Cusa's Idiota de Sapientia', *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 66 (2019), p. 10.

interpretation. For Miller, *De Non Aliud* 'dramatizes' the kind of 'dialectical thinking'[51] where 'finite and infinite are one and not one'[52] and where God is 'present and yet absent' in the immanent realm.[53] Such dialectical or paradoxical readings of the God–world relationship in *De Non Aliud* clearly grasp something of the fundamentally Cusan impulse to go beyond contradictories to a place where opposites coincide. However, they do not seem to go far enough, insofar as they still consciously operate within the very dualities that Cusanus tries to overcome. What is more, the dialectical or paradoxical readings do not answer the question *why* there should be the both-and in Cusanus' thought that they claim to be there and how it relates to any larger theological commitments in his work. If Cusanus was a kind of 'dialectical' theologian, then in order for this designation not to be a potentially anachronistic imposition on his work, it would have to be shown how it applies to other parts of Cusanus' work.

An alternative, and arguably more fruitful, approach to understanding the God–world relationship presupposed and advocated by *De Non Aliud*, starts with enquiring what it means to be 'other', for Cusanus. Otherness, for him, is first of all a category which characterizes creatures and designates the difference between them. It is a characteristic of every finite thing that it could be otherwise. This is because finite things admit of 'being more' or 'being less' in all their qualities, and as long as they cannot reach an actual maximum compared to which there cannot be anything greater (which they never will), they are always subject to change.[54] Or as Cusanus puts it: 'All things that are "other" could be otherwise because they are other'.[55] Otherness or alterity is therefore the decisive characteristic of finitude or creaturely being. In the finite world, things are what they are by virtue of each thing being other than the others. In this sense, finite things are 'characterized by a modality of being that is their "alterity"', as Jean Celeyrette put it.[56] The reason for this ultimately lies in an understanding of metaphysical participation, as Cusanus explains in one of the propositions at the end of the treatise: The Good, for instance, 'is participated in by all other good things, and it is differently participated in by different [good things]. Therefore, there will never be two equally good things (or two equally equal things) which cannot be better (or more nearly equal)'.[57]

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51 Miller, 'God as *Li Non-Aliud*', p. 38.
52 Miller, 'God as *Li Non-Aliud*', p. 32.
53 Miller, 'God as *Li Non-Aliud*', p. 37.
54 See *De Non Aliud*, Proposition 17, n. 122: 'Quare videt omnia, quae alia esse possent, semper posse alia esse in recipientibus magis seu maius numquam deveniri ad actum maximum, quo maius esse nequit, et quae aliud esse possunt, quia numquam ad ipsum non-aliud attingunt, semper possunt esse aliud'.
55 *De Non Aliud* XXIII, n. 106: 'Omnia quippe alia, quia aliud, esse aliter possent'.
56 Jean Celeyrette, 'Mathematics and Theology: The Infinite in Nicholas of Cusa', *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 70 (2011), p. 156.
57 *De Non Aliud*, Proposition 18, n. 123: 'Bonum igitur . . . ab omnibus aliis bonis participatur et in aliis aliter. Numquam igitur erunt duo aeque bona aut aeque aequalia, quae meliora esse non possint aut aequaliora'.

In other words, things are 'other' from each other because they are unable to participate equally in the oneness of the first principle.

Insofar as he holds that God is not other, this characterization of finite things as 'other' naturally also touches on Cusanus' understanding of the God–world relationship. Evidently, this relationship is not determined by a simple otherness (of God compared to creation). Rather, Cusanus' point is that whatever is 'other' lacks that quality compared to which it is 'other'. Given, however, that God does not lack anything, he cannot be said to be other than any thing: 'Because other is other than something, it lacks that than which it is other. But because Not-other is not other than anything, it does not lack anything'.[58] Importantly, moreover, even though 'other' and 'not-other' may *seem* to be opposed, there cannot be any opposition between that which is other, and that from which it has the fact that it is other, as Cusanus insists.[59]

It is here where we find again the performative aspect of Cusanus' thought which we encountered above: just as Cusanus refused to posit meaning in theological language outside of the actual use of it, so does he refuse to consider the God–world relationship in abstraction from a consideration of who does the enquiry, and how they are themselves implicated in this relationship. If all finite beings are characterized by an otherness which is given to them by a source which is not-other, then this affects finite epistemological capabilities to understand that which is not other. When Peter Balbus, Cusanus' second interlocutor in *De Non Aliud*, remarks that he cannot conceive of what *non aliud* is, Cusanus retorts: 'If you were able to conceive it, then by no means would it be the Beginning-of-all-things, which signifies all in all. For every human concept is a concept of some one thing. But Not-other is prior to every concept, since a concept is not other than a concept'.[60] *Non aliud* is precisely an attempt to name that which is before or outside all concepts, but since human understanding is tied to conceptuality, not other has to remain partly opaque to us. And yet it cannot be fully opaque for two reasons:

> You see now that (1) the Not-other is presupposed and known in every cognition and that (2) what is known is not other from it, but rather is that unknown, which shines forth in the known in the manner of the known, just

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58   *De Non Aliud* VI, n. 20: 'Aliud enim, quia aliud est ab aliquo, eo caret, a quo aliud. Non-aliud autem, quia a nullo aliud est, non caret aliquo'.

59   Cf. *De Non Aliud* VI, n. 21: 'Deus autem, quia non aliud est ab alio, non est aliud, quamvis non-aliud et aliud videantur opponi; sed non opponitur aliud ipsi, a quo habet, quod est aliud'. See also proposition 6, n. 115.

60   *De Non Aliud* XX, n. 94: 'Si quidem posses id concipere, haud utique esset omnium principium, quod in omnibus omnia significaret. Omnis enim humanus conceptus unius alicuius conceptus est. Verum ante conceptum non-aliud est, quando quidem conceptus non aliud quam conceptus est'.

as the clarity of the sun, which is sensibly invisible, shines forth visibly in the visible colours of the rainbow.[61]

Each of these reasons deserve some unpacking in turn.

First, Cusanus suggests that 'not other' is in some way known even to human knowers who are characterized by being 'other' because every cognitive act, even within the realm of otherness, presupposes 'not other' as its principle. How are we to understand this? Cusanus explains that the principle of both being and knowing must precede all being and knowing. If we were to imagine the impossible, namely that someone removed the origin of being and knowing, then nothing would remain, no being and no cognition.[62] The principle of being and knowing is the condition of possibility of being and knowing, and as such always precedes that which we seek knowledge of.[63] However, as Cusanus reminds his interlocuter Ferdinand, 'because your attention is directed to an other, which you desire to see and to hear, you do not concentrate in consideration of the origin, even though it is the beginning, middle, and end of that which is sought'.[64] This is to say: just as the process of thinking is made visible through the linguistic form of 'not other' (as seen above), so 'not other' as a cipher makes 'visible', for Cusanus, what is equally as easily overlooked in the process of understanding, namely, the One in whom lies the condition of all being and understanding.

The second reason why 'not other' is not entirely inaccessible to finite beings is that whatever epistemological limits our finite condition may entail, something of 'not other' can nonetheless be attained from within these limits. Even though Cusanus stresses that the principle of all things – not other – cannot be grasped as it is in itself, and that the one seeking it, being herself an other, will necessarily have to seek it in the other, he nevertheless believes that the principle can be 'approximately' visible in the other, just as light – which is in itself invisible – becomes visible when it is reflected.[65] 'Not other' can in this sense be beheld in a finite 'other'. As Cusanus puts it: 'The seeing which I direct toward God is not a visible seeing but is a seeing of the invisible

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61 *De Non Aliud* VIII, n. 31: '[V]ides ipsum non-aliud in omni cognitione praesupponi et cognosci, neque quod cognoscitur ab ipso aliud esse, sed esse ipsum incognitum, quod in cognito cognite relucescit, sicut solis claritas sensibiliter invisibilis in iridis coloribus visibilibus visibiliter relucet'.

62 Cf. *De Non Aliud* III, n. 9: 'Deus … essendi [et] cognoscendi omnibus principium est. Quem si quis substrahit, nihil manet neque in re, neque in cognitione'.

63 Cf. *De Non Aliud* III, n. 10: 'Nam proprie non quaeritur principium, quod quaesitum semper antecedit, et sine quo quaesitum minime quaeri potest'.

64 *De Non Aliud* III, n. 9: '[Q]ia ad aliud, quod videre cupis audireve, est intentio, in principii consideratione non defigeris, quamquam id principium, medium et finis est quaesiti'.

65 Cf. *De Non Aliud* III, n. 10: 'Lux igitur in visibili ubi percipiatur, exquiritur, ut sic saltem attrectabiliter videatur'.

in the visible'.[66] In this sense, the creature is 'the revelation of … the light, which is God, manifesting itself'.[67] What is more, Cusanus holds that the *ratio* of all things – the reason why a thing is that which it is and not something else – lies in the way in which there coincides in each creature the finite and the infinite (or, the other and the not-other): 'When I behold Not-other in an other and behold the other antecedently in Not-other as Not-other, I see how it is that through Not-other, and without any other, all things are that which they are'.[68] In other words, all things that are 'other' are seen as having their being and origin in 'not other', where all things originate and are given to be what they are.

When taken together, these considerations amount to expressing a God–world relationship which is both characterized by a qualitative ontological difference between the Creator and creation, and a form of analogical reasoning which rules out any competition between the two. The particular virtue of Cusanus' approach in *De Non Aliud* lies in how it acknowledges the human entanglement when thinking about just such a relationship: sustained in being by God, we, as knowing subjects, cannot be detached or disinterested observers, able to cast a neutral judgement on metaphysical questions. Rather, our own epistemological position needs to be considered, and this is exactly what Cusanus does when he emphasizes the need to attend to the condition of all knowing. In this sense, he not only describes a certain God–world relationship, but invites his interlocutors and readers to engage in this very relationship which is already sustaining their thinking and being.

Moreover, the way Cusanus reformulates analogical reasoning – that we may see 'not other' in the other – is not a logical exercise in determining to what degree the source of all being is like or unlike finite being. Rather, not unlike his approach in *De Visione Dei*, he considers – almost phenomenologically – how finite beings may *see* that which is beyond finitude. Cusanus' pervasive use of the metaphors of sight and of light is crucial here insofar as they confirm his performative approach 'from below'. We cannot even speak about the principle of all being and knowing without using language determined by finitude, such as the sense of vision. And yet, such finitude does not obscure or compete with the infinite, but is somehow transparent towards it, precisely because it is given to be what it is by the infinite.

Cusanus equally resists a disinterested observer's position in the way he conceives of the origin of otherness or alterity. In contrast to his predecessors,

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66   *De Non Aliud* XXII, n. 103: 'Videre enim illud, quod equidem ad Deum refero, non est videre visibile, set est videre in visibili invisibile'.

67   *De Non Aliud*, proposition 12, n. 118: 'Creatura igitur est ipsius … lucis, quae Deus est, se ipsam manifestationis'.

68   *De Non Aliud* VI, n. 22: 'Cum igitur in alio ipsum [viz. non aliud] intueor aliudque in ipso ipsum, prioriter: quomodo per ipsum sine alio aliquot omnia id sunt, quod quidem sunt, video'.

Cusanus did not conceive of *alteritas* as a principle, as Thomas McTighe has shown: 'Cusa's sources had accounted for differentiation by means of the principle of otherness. Boethius in the De Trinitate asserts that *principium pluralitatis est alteritas* and this thesis was extensively developed by Thierry of Chartres'.[69] Instead of being its own principle, alterity, for Cusanus, is simply the contingent condition of those things which are not God. The differentiated being of creatures is an effect of contingency alone. Put differently, 'the fact that there is diversity is due to contingency, not God' because 'God communicates himself without diversity'.[70] This position seems to be paradoxical at first, because if otherness is due to contingency and not God, this still raises the question where contingency comes from, especially if it is professed that God created everything from nothing. Cusanus indirectly answers this question by highlighting that what we are dealing with here is a matter of perspective, or the finite mode of understanding. Writing about the *ratio mundi* – that which constitutes the world and through which all things have been created – he reiterates that he does

> not at all comprehend this *ratio*. For were I to comprehend it, surely I would know why the world is the way it is and not otherwise, why the sun is the sun, the moon the moon, the earth the earth, why any given thing is what it is and not another or greater or lesser. Indeed, if I once knew all of this, I would no longer be a creature and a part of the universe since my reason would be the creative principle (*ars creativa*) of the universe and the creator of itself.[71]

In other words, what I perceive to be contingent, namely, why the sun is different from the moon and why each thing is what it is in its alterity, is only contingent for me because of my finite epistemological position. In fact, it must be contingent from within this position, because if it were not, I would be no creature, and no part of the universe, but God, the creative principle of everything.

Again, Cusanus invites his readers to think about the mode in which creatures receive God's gift of being, and does so by drawing them into (a deeper awareness of) the God–world relationship in which they already find themselves, rather than standing back and describing this very relationship. This conclusion is both confirmed and nuanced by Cusanus' emphasis we have encountered above, namely, that the finite realm can only be surpassed enigmatically or

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69 Thomas P. McTighe, 'Contingentia and Alteritas in Cusa's Metaphysics', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 64 (1990), p. 56.

70 McTighe, 'Contingentia and Alteritas in Cusa's Metaphysics', p. 65.

71 *De Non Aliud* IX, n. 32: '[I]psam [mundi rationem] tamen minime comprehendo. Nam si ipsam comprehenderem, profecto cur mundus sic est et non aliter scirem, cur sol sol, luna luna, terra terra et quodvis id, quod est et nec aliud, nec maius, nec minus; quippe si statim haec scirem, non ego essem creatura et portio universi, quia ratio mea esset ars universi creativa ita et suiipsius creatrix'.

that venturing beyond the finite perspective can only be done in a 'mystical' key, without positing any ontological a priori. Applied to the God–world relationship this means that this relationship itself cannot be considered from a neutral perspective outside of human finitude. The claim that God's being can be said to be totally equivocal or univocal to finite being oversteps this boundary because it claims to grasp the nature of God's being in a rather un-enigmatic way, even when it claims to do so negatively. In other words, what Burton's and Miller's 'dialectical' readings of *De Non Aliud* fail to take into account is that Cusanus refuses to step outside of human finitude to a bird's-eye perspective; and positing both an ontological univocity and an ontological equivocity would entail such a step.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Cusanus' *De Non Aliud* does indeed offer guidance for those who desire to think and speak fittingly about God and God's relationship to finitude, and it does so in a way which is supremely aware of the seeker's finitude and utter dependence on God. *Not other* invites a way of thinking and speaking about God and God's relation to the created world which finds meaning in theological language only in the actual use of it, and which considers how finite beings who enquire about the God–world relationship are themselves implicated in this relationship. In doing so, Cusanus performatively draws his finite readers into a relationship to the infinite which is characterized by relation in difference, and otherness in connection.