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***Nicolaus Cusanus Unbound: An Investigation
into Parallels between his Liberal Philosophy
and Object-Oriented Ontology***

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Abstract

This paper intends to reexamine the idiosyncratic thoughts of Nicholas Cusanus (Nicholas of Cusa), a fifteenth-century German theologian-cum-philosopher who has generally been considered to be just a transitional figure to the succeeding, modern thinkers. The chief argument of this essay is that his conception of God as both immanent and transcendent has a number of interesting parallels with contemporary, de-anthropocentric philosophies, especially with Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology (OOO), and in fact can be regarded as a prescient harbinger to OOO in that Nicholas evidently urges one to assume a more liberal worldview while simultaneously equipping his own theory with a logic intelligible to others. In the closing section, the author of this paper poses a few proposals drawn from the investigation both to the discipline of philosophy and to the general public.

Keywords: *Nicholas of Cusa, Object-Oriented Ontology, Graham Harman, flat ontology, withdrawal.*

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In so far as one can discern from various accounts in existing publications, it appears to be a general consensus amongst most scholars to adjudicate Nicolaus Cusanus (Nicholas of Cusa) either to be a transitional thinker between the high Renaissance and the early modern period, or to be a harbinger to the latter. For instance, McTighe (1964) judged his conception of 'coincidence of opposites' to be a forerunner of modern, rational ways of thinking, because with it Nicholas tried to prove the existence of God with the aid of mathematical rationale, that is, with a scientific method, while Miller (2017) regards that pantheistic orientation which can be widely seen in his texts as the precursor to the philosophy of Spinoza (pp. 153-154). True it is that these evaluations are legitimate to a respectable extent, and it is not only pointless but also counterproductive to poke holes in them.

Nevertheless, it would remiss of us to demote the varied qualities of the ideas which he propounded just to the role of a mere herald of succeeding philosophies. There is no doubt that he retained a touch of the medieval theology in that he principally discussed problems relative to the God; still, when one observes them from a little detached standpoint, she or he will locate a lot of traits which bear a curious resemblance with several philosophical thoughts of our age.

Above all else, it is remarkable that the philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa evinces 'object-oriented' characters; concretely speaking, in his texts we can identify a horizontal perspective which regards every one of existences as ontologically equal, as well as a fastidious argumentation which guarantees the independence of each of those beings. As is well known these days, object-oriented ontology (OOO) is a school of philosophy that has been advocated by a number of theorists like Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, and Timothy Morton, and the influence of OOO is rapidly spreading especially in art and architecture (Kolatan, 2019, p. 91). Although OOO is a product of this era, it shares peculiar characteristics with the thoughts of Nicholas of Cusa, and it seems that to heed this aspect would be conducive

to some interesting discoveries which have potential to make our worldview more broad-minded.

In order to demonstrate the analogies between them, the argument of this essay will go as follows: in the beginning, OOO itself and two of its essential components—flat ontology and withdrawal—are going to be explained by quoting passages from Harman’s texts. Thereupon, the parallels between these principles of OOO and the progressive metaphysics of Nicholas of Cusa will be investigated, and then the next section will demonstrate that the philosopher of the 15th century possessed an astoundingly de-anthropocentric intention, positing that God as the absolute maximum inheres in every single one of entities and that all of them are unable to be reduced or exhausted by another. In closing, this essay will put forward several proposals both to the discipline of philosophy including a reappraisal of underestimated thinkers like Nicholas of Cusa and to the general public.

Object-Oriented Ontology, Flat Ontology, and Withdrawal

One notable tendency in the field of philosophy during the last couple of decades is that our species, scilicet mankind, has been gradually deprived of its exceptional status among other forms of beings; one could modify it with such adjectives as ‘post-human’ and ‘de-anthropocentric’. Richard Grusin (2014), who has been active in multiple spheres of scholarship, gave a lucid exposition of this trend with the term of ‘nonhuman turn’:

Intended as a macroscopic concept, the nonhuman turn is meant to account for the simultaneous or overlapping emergence of a number of different theoretical or critical ‘turns’—for example, the ontological, network, neurological, affective, digital, ecological, or evolutionary.... Each of these different elements of the nonhuman turn derives from theoretical movements that argue (in one way or another) against human exceptionalism.... (pp. ix-x)

Needless to say, despite having a shared aim to challenge the naïve human centrism which had long gone unquestioned, each of those movements pursues its own distinctive agenda: For example, some theorists have placed a major emphasis upon animals, mammals in especial, rather than existences in general (Hallaway, 2013; MacCormack, 2014), whereas other figures like Iain Hamilton Grant (2006) has criticized such a leaning as “biocentrism” and claimed that we should also take note of inanimate matters.

One can rightly hold object-oriented ontology as one ramification of this tide and may have a snag in discriminating it from other critical approaches; yet, it signalizes itself amidst them with its categorical determination to treat every object as ontologically tantamount and with its meticulously constructed framework that substantiates the apparently quixotic aspiration. Although one could spot an upholder of OOO in diverse academic domains, the person who has made the most outstanding contribution to the theoretical refinement of the ontology is Graham Harman; now a distinguished professor of Southern California Institute of Architecture, he has energetically written scores of papers and books about OOO.

He has stated that the starting point of his philosophy is the concept of ‘flat ontology’, and what corroborates it theoretically is the notion of ‘withdrawal’. The section below will elucidate these notions in order to clarify how OOO is unique and why the worldview which it is presenting should be attended to.

Flat Ontology

‘Flat ontology’ is a term which was originally set forth by the English philosopher of science Roy Bhaskar to collectively designate “theories that flatten the world into its accessibility to human observers”, and “it was a dismissive phrase aimed at positivism” (Harman, 2011, p. 177). But the meaning of the expression was later transformed by Manuel DeLanda into a positive one; now the foremost sense of the phrase is an

ontology that first and foremost deals with all objects in the same way (Harman, 2018). Although he has repeatedly made clear that he intends to furnish his object-oriented ontology with a more sophisticated, persuasive structure, he has reckoned flat ontology as a suitable starting point for philosophy and as a useful way to ensure that we do not cave in to our personal biases about what is or is not real (Harman, 2018).

The concept of flat ontology might strike one as too simple and plain, and some would wonder the reason why Harman puts such a particular stress upon it as the ground zero of his ontology. In fact, this is exactly because he wants to bring the usually disregarded fact to light that most philosophies from antiquity to this day have not accorded condign consideration to each of the different, discrete objects and in lieu reduced them either downward to their material foundations or upward to their functional aspects (Harman, 2011a). Albeit a bit abstract, this penetrative assertion is of considerable intellectual significance since it reveals the central problem with which many of the modern philosophical schools are beset: namely, the predilection for prioritizing *relationships* between/among objects to the substantive *objects themselves*. One could adduce Plato's philosophy, German idealism, theories advanced by structuralists and post-structuralists, 'philosophy of organism' of Alfred North Whitehead, and 'actor network theory' of Bruno Latour.

Harman (1999) censured these theses by remarking that "the paradigm of 'contextuality' or 'relationality' has now been stamped in our minds to the point that it dominates every corner of our thinking" (p. 174), and highlighted the importance of reconsidering the independence and autonomy of individual objects: "once we begin from naïvete rather than doubt, objects immediately take center stage" (Harman, 2011b, p. 7). Being keenly aware of this situation and realizing how problematic it is, Harman has put forward flat ontology as the base of his object-oriented ontology.

Withdrawal

However evident the ethical cogency of flat ontology may be, it is sure that most people would not rate solely advocating the equality of beings as a convincing metaphysics. Harman has been naturally cognizant of that, observing that a OOO thinker were to say nothing more than ‘humans, animals, inanimate matter and fictional characters all equally exist’ after many years of theorization, then not much progression would have been made (Harman, 2018). ‘Withdrawal’ is the conception that Harman has employed and polished up in order to turn the loose idea of flat ontology into his rigorous, object-oriented ontology.

Although Harman derived a profound inspiration for it from the famous ‘tool-analysis’ which Martin Heidegger had conducted in *Time and Being*, he has evolved it into a more comprehensive intellectual conception. The key points of the ‘tool-analysis’ are as follows: when a person uses a tool, she or he is normally never conscious of its presence; in other words, she or he reduces the tool to only an instrumental quality, forgetting that it can probably work in a variety of different ways; still, it can break, and then she or he is confronted with the fact that the tool possesses aspects which have been beyond her or his comprehension—in that manner, the tool withdraws from its user (Heidegger, 1927/1962, pp. 73-77). Whereas Heidegger, possibly constrained by the anthropocentric bent of his time, had presumed that withdrawal could occur only between a *human* subject and an object, Harman has posited that it could occasion in every contact between objects:

Just as we never grasp the being of the two pieces of rock, neither do they fully unlock the being of *each other* when they slam together in distant space. Contra Heidegger, withdrawal is not a specific feature of human temporality, but belongs to *any relation whatsoever*. That tool-beings retreat into a silent background means not only that they are invisible to humans, but that they exceed any of their interactions with other tool beings. (Harman, 1999, 5; italics original)

Harman proffered the most thorough discussion regarding ‘withdrawal’ in a chapter of his first book *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (1999, pp. 101-205), and has introduced a good deal of examples to prove the validity of the concept elsewhere (2005, pp. 190-230; 2011c, p. 177; 2012, pp. 251-260).

Here one would perceive how cogently this theoretical device could equip flat ontology with a logical foundation. Allowing for the fact that every single one of existences always retains some dormant qualities that might be unknown to others and perhaps to itself—what Harman has called “unexhausted surplus” (2011d, p. 174)—it would be an improbable fantasy and sheer hubris for one to assume herself or himself to have perfect comprehension of another being. Such a realization would prompt one to embrace a schema characterized by flat ontological thoughts. Object-oriented ontology is, in short, a systematic type of flat ontology which is logically upheld by the coherent conception of ‘withdrawal’. One is able to know the primacy of ‘withdrawal’ in OOO from the fact that other ideas that Harman invented to construct his ontology (e.g. ‘vicarious causation’, ‘allure’, etc.) are all based on it.

As could be understood even from the abridged account above, OOO has tremendous resonance in this age when the cumulative (and often pernicious) effects of our anthropocentric activities upon other existences are becoming more and more palpable in the various districts of the world. Therefore, although those who first come across the bold doctrines of OOO may consider them to have been born out of the needs of the present day, yet, when one looks into the past history of philosophy, she or he will detect several thinkers who presciently voiced opinions analogous to OOO: Aristotle and Leibnitz are, as Harman (2013) himself pointed out, noteworthy

in that they partially accentuated the equal autonomy of each being. But the man whom Harman has failed to descry as one of his forerunners and who articulated probably the most object-oriented opinion before him is Nicholas of Cusa.

Object-Oriented Characters of Nicholas of Cusa

As adumbrated in the introductory part, Nicholas of Cusa seems to be understood as follows by and large: A Renaissance theologian, the principal worth of whose ideas consists in that they jointly functioned as one of the springboards for modern, more rational thoughts and philosophies (Taton, 1964, p. 13; Scribner and Johnson, 1996, p. 244).

This and other reductive types of comprehension of him, however, should be amended since they fail to recognize many interesting facets which his texts bring forward. This essay would like to throw one of them into relief, namely, its *object-oriented* quality. One could locate the most conspicuous manifestation of it in his idiosyncratic conceptualization of God. He radically opined that God was *immanent*, which means that every entity is the embodiment of God; it inevitably entails that all objects are set on a flat plane; meanwhile, he tactfully held the view that God was *transcendent*, therefore each of them was not exhaustible by another in that God the Maximum could not be fully attained by anything else. This section will describe the strategic definition and illuminate how close it is to OOO in terms of their de-anthropocentric, object-oriented nature.

God as both Immanent and Transcendent

When one would like to appreciate the unique significance of the ideas that Nicholas of Cusa set forth, she or he would be recommended to possess an elementary knowledge of the predominant view on the relationship between God and other beings (both animate and inanimate) which most people had assumed to be true during the middle ages. To put it schematically, it had been almost universally embraced that the

supreme property of God was being *transcendent*, that is, God was conceived as the absolute, perfect creator and originator from which all of the other existences were born, and thus literally superior to everything else (Bréhier, 1969, pp. 148-149; Grant, 2001, p. 287); in other words, people at that time had presupposed that “God is above the world” (Schneider, 1931, p. 626; Muessig, 2006, p. 60). Harman (2018b), as a matter of course, has repudiated such an image of God as irrationally privileged exception, and this is also the very conception of God against which Nicholas of Cusa flung down the gauntlet; he, in lieu of the mainstream presumption, proposed a perspective on God and other existences that was singularly similar to the Harman’s object-oriented ontology.

His ontological framework was rooted in the firm belief that God was, albeit assuredly transcendent, *immanent* at the same time, which means that God exists in all beings all over the universe. Although he was not the first figure who put forward such an understanding of God (Simmons, 2015, p. 153), he should be noted since he was probably the most strenuous advocate of the attitude in his day, to the extent that several coeval churchmen suspected that his view had gone too far from the official credo and even discussed whether he should be arraigned (Hopkins, 1986, p. 8; Gilson, 2019, p. 803). As early as the Christmas of 1439, he pronounced this stance in a lecture wherein he preached that God should dwell in the soul of every being (Hoffman and Klibansky, 1929), and later developed it in elaborate detail both in the first and chiefly in the second volumes of his signature work which was titled *On Learned Ignorance*. He posited that the world was the enfoldment and unfoldment (*explicatio* in Latin, the original language) of God; since every entity in the world exists thanks to God, is born out of God, and is in God, the world is both one entirety and is made of numerous entireties (Nicholas of Cusa, 1440/2001 pp. 32-39). It follows that “there is neither anything which is other nor anything which is different, where a man does not differ from a lion, and the sky does not differ from the earth” (Nicholas of Cusa, 1440/2001, p. 41).

One could apprehend how radical this proclamation of Nicholas of Cusa would have sounded to the ear of his contemporaries by simply remembering that those who believed in the Roman Catholic Church during the medieval period took the naively discriminatory precept of the 'great chain of being' for granted (Knowles, 1962, p. 356); to wit, in medieval thought, men "have enjoyed a special place within the cosmic scheme" (Jones, 2013, p. 62). The worldview which Nicholas of Cusa advanced was quite the opposite. For him, the world was the arena where every existence was given completely equal status as God.

Some would argue that such a flattening postulation may, on account of its very flatness, dispossess individual beings of their individuality by blotting out differences between/among them, as some of the less capable pantheistic theorists which succeeded to Nicholas contended with rash arguments, conferring preference upon generality over peculiarity (Erickson, 1998, p. 330; Jaroszyński, 2007, p. 196). But, Nicholas went to assiduous pains to differentiate his theory from such a totalitarian doctrine (Nicholas of Cusa, 1440/2001, pp. 65-68). The concluding remark below would mightily attest his solid conviction that although the ontological standing of each object must be equal, its individuality should be considered with proper deference:

It is evident that God is in all things in such way that all things are in Him; and it is now evident that God is in all things through the mediation of the universe, as it were. Hence, it is evident that all is in all and each in each. (Nicholas of Cusa, 1440/2001, p. 71)

Here one would identify an unmistakable analogy to Harman's espousal of flat ontology in his philosophical system of OOO. In the universe which Nicholas pictured, all objects are not different ontologically; nonetheless, each of them simultaneously holds its own position as an independent unit.

As Harman has looked on the notion of ‘flat ontology’ just as the base point, Nicholas of Cusa knew well too that he would not persuade others who were more or less confined by the traditional beliefs to accept such a revolutionary view without a well-reasoned logic, and was shrewd enough to grant sometimes a certain amount of concession when the circumstances required him to do so. Here we should remember that he did not deny the *transcendental* property of God. One would estimate the delineation to be a fundamental inconsistency; yet, Nicholas of Cusa defined the transcendental quality of God in a tactical fashion which reasonably bolstered his objective to make his more open-minded outlook understandable; to put it differently, in his deductive structure, the conception of transcendental God carries out a function which ‘withdrawal’ does in Harman’s OOO—i.e. it theoretically props up the radically liberal stance which looks on all existences without discrimination.

In the early part of *On Learned Ignorance*, he, like many of the intellectuals in his epoch, frankly made clear that God should transcend the understanding of all things; yet, he then employed an idiosyncratic expression: “Absolute Maximum” was the phrase that he used to verbalize the trait, and he defined the word in the following manner: “I give the name “Maximum” to that than which there cannot be anything greater” (Nicholas of Cusa, 1440/2001, p. 6). There may seem to be little difference between ‘transcendent’ and ‘maximum’ as a word to modify the Christian God; still, this apparently tiny differentiation and the emphasis on the latter were his cunning tacks to convince his conservative contemporaries of his point.

In a preliminary discussion, he put forth the notion of “learned ignorance”, and clarified that it was by no means the same with the knowledge of one’s own ignorance that Socrates in Plato’s dialogues had promoted (Nicholas of Cusa, 1440/2001, p. 6). He presented it as a *religious* tenet which a follower of Christianity should bear as a subject of the Absolute Maximum: “learned ignorance sees most clearly...that the

unqualifiedly Maximum exists necessarily” (Nicholas of Cusa, 1440/2001, p. 12).

To summarize, Nicholas of Cusa lodged his theory in the following fashion: inasmuch as God as the Absolute Maximum, in nature, never allows any other being to be comparable with it, it is beyond every opposition and contradiction; hence, we are on no account able to define God by any affirmative or negative statement; as a predictable consequence, nothing in the universe can comprehend it, because the understanding of a being, limited by the law of contradiction, is not capable of uniting the contradictory definitions like X and non-X; everyone is thus required to espouse this form of “learned ignorance” to be a better Christian (Nicholas of Cusa, 1440/2001, pp. 16-46). Such a relationship between God as the Maximum and ‘learned ignorance’ was further developed in his later works, with Nicholas stating: “In an infinitely excellent way He is prior to whatever is conceived and named by us as truth” and “I understand clearly that in the realm of all creatures neither God nor His name is found and that God escapes all conception” (Nicholas of Cusa, 1444/1994, pp. 304-305).

These discourses must strike a modern reader as all too banal and old-fashioned theological abstractions, and the reader would not fathom the reason why Nicholas harped on the same string over and over. But, this was the incarnation of diplomatic ingenuity of Nicholas. He, cognizant of the indispensability to partly conform to the established intellectual paradigm, blended his staple argument for the immanence of God with the traditional picture of God as transcendent. If God inheres in every existence of the world and God as the Absolute Maximum, in turn, is never attainable by any other being, it would logically follow that nothing can acquire mastery nor supremacy over another. Undoubtedly, this kind of reasoning was a rhetorical tactic and would not sound sufficiently convincing for us modern people; notwithstanding, we ought not to ignore the epistemological difference lying between the premodern people and us. As Harman sought to propound his

object-oriented ontology to other people with the aid of an insight of Heidegger, whose ideas have arguably impressed modern people most strikingly, Nicholas of Cusa had recourse to transcendent God in order to make his case and depicted a world where inexhaustible God should inhabit all existences, each of which democratically should 'withdraw' from each other.

It is natural for one to ponder why such a progressive worldview has been basically overlooked for a long time. Michel Foucault gave us a beneficial clue to reflect over this problem with the famous conception of 'episteme'. According to him, the primordial pattern which determines people's way of thinking before the seventeenth century was totally different from those which would be accepted thereafter (Foucault, 1962/2002, pp. 375-422); probably, because of the structural disparity, few have been able to regard Nicholas as a thinker who advanced an agenda that has an echo with the contemporary era. Therefore, he has been counted as just a Renaissance theologian. But, at this very moment when the esteem for other beings is becoming increasingly important, we should look back upon his philosophy, according to which no object would be permitted to reign over another as a superior because every single one of existences in the world, as God, should be given equal status.

Conclusion: Proposals to Philosophy Today and the General Public

Above, this paper revealed that object-oriented ontology's conceptions of flat ontology and withdrawal have unmissable similitude with the thoughts of Nicholas of Cusa. In this closing section, the author of this paper would like to venture a few suggestions for the discipline of philosophy and my fellow human beings. Firstly, we ought to reread texts written by

philosophers whose ideas are ordinarily deemed as obsolete. Words like 'medieval' and 'transitional' may imply that their ideas have already been overcome by succeeding generations; still, as this article made clear, one could sometimes espy an unanticipated insight for this epoch. Although a thorough examination will require other papers, the exact logic of Thomas Aquinas should be studied in its own right, and the cosmology of Giordano Bruno has telling analogies with the centrifugal theory of Jacques Derrida. Secondly, it is notable that de-anthropocentric opinion was proposed in a quite convincing manner as early as the 15th century. The era is far ahead of the beginning of the industrial revolution, yet, as Hughes (2014) attested, harmful repercussions which activities of mankind imposed upon the environment and other existences began to expand around that time (p. 104). For those who live at this volatile time, it is an imminent task to contain the human centrism and to pay due respect to other beings which stand on the same plane with us; if we fail to cope with this problem, we would be sent to our doom. As long as our forefathers including Nicholas of Cusa have afforded beneficial monitions, it would be our obligation to hearken their calls and to conduct ourselves in a more appropriate manner; the resultant world would be, possibly, a republic of objects.

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