

Nicholas of Cusa's "Not-Other": The Absolute as Negative Self-Reference

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INTRODUCTION

Negative statements are a traditional means in ancient metaphysics to describe the transcendence of absolute Unity, or God. Though many modern scholars believe that negative theology is the essential mode in which human beings apprehend the *unio mystica*, Nicholas of Cusa's notion of God as not-other (*non aliud*) suggests that negative theology's function extends beyond transcendence to signaling the superessentiality of God and enunciating divine activity. The idea of God as not-other is a double negation: God's superessentiality negates every other (*aliud*) while defining itself as absolute transcendence. Through this double negation, moreover, all other things derive their existence from God. Yet how can negation, typically a sign of difference and privation, and criticized by many modern scholars, characterize the self-defining superessentiality and activity of God? How do we understand the possibility of active negation? The answer lies in the negative self-referentiality of the superessential not-other. Without recourse to affirmative theology, this concept expresses the idea of a self-defining and creative God and explains how the divine can be perceived in its derivatives.

I

In his late work *De li non aliud* the German philosopher Nicholas of Cusa introduces one of his most compelling notions of the divine: God as *not-other*.¹ According to Nicholas, each thing that exists is, in its essence,

1. Dirk Cürsgen's important work on Nicholas's concept of *non aliud* has been crucial for this article. See his *Die Logik der Unendlichkeit: Die Philosophie des Absoluten im Spätwerk des Nikolaus von Kues* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007), 91–126 and "Die Metaphysik der Negativität und Identität bei Nikolaus von Kues," *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 54, no. 2 (2009): 341–69. I discussed the theory of the negative self-reference and its sources in more detail in my doctoral thesis which is going to be published by Walter de Gruyter.

“aliud,” or other.² Strictly speaking, the idea of *other* negates through difference, or otherness. It is, so to speak, an ‘otherly negation’ (*andersheitliche Negation*). This essential feature of Cusan ontology says that, as *other*, each individual being is identical with itself and different from everything else. Each individual being is, therefore, *other* than every other individual being. The self-identity of an individual being is expressed by its specific otherness, making every individual being the coincidence of identity and difference. The specific difference of an individual being articulates the self-identity of an individual being and its difference to others. Without otherness, that which exists is hard to define, as every being is only itself in reference to itself through its specific otherness vis-à-vis other beings.³

If *other* is a negation, then *not-other* is a double negation, for not-other negates every other—and, therefore, otherness in general. But its negation is not privative. If it were, then it would not fulfill the function Nicholas assigns it: the Absolute that defines all things.⁴ Nor is negation of not-other a negation through otherness. According to Nicholas, the concept of not-other defines both itself and everything else.⁵ Not-other, in other words, is an expression of self-referentiality. In this act of all-defining negation, Nicholas appears to suggest that the Absolute delineates itself from everything that exists while all that exists issues from the Absolute. This double negation signifies God’s transcendence: through negation, the Absolute surpasses all other things.

Yet the idea that the Absolute is negatively delineated from the other sounds like a delineation through otherness, a form of negation that would render the Absolute a mere *other* among *others*, a form of relation in which otherness is achieved by otherly negation. If this were so, then the Absolute would distinguish itself through otherness from everything that exists. But as not-other, the Absolute cannot be an *other* in relation to its derivatives; indeed, it cannot be an other at all.⁶ This negation type is logically and ontologically different from forms of negation based on privation and otherness. The absolute act of negation transcends every other form of negation.

2. See Nicholas of Cusa, *Nicholai de Cusa Opera Omnia*, vol. 13, *Directio speculantis seu de non aliud*, ed. Ludwig Baur and Paul Wilpert (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1944), chap. 1, p. 5, lines 1–5 [no. 5]. [*God as Not-Other*, in *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*, trans. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: A.J. Banning Press, 2001), 1109–10.]

3. In an early study on Nicholas’s philosophy, Klaus Jacobi characterized Cusan ontology as an “ontology of differences.” See Klaus Jacobi, *Die Methode der cusanischen Philosophie* (Freiburg: K. Albers, 1969). Recently, Stephan Grotz worked out the intricacies of Nicholas’s thoughts on the coincidence of identity and difference in the essence of individual being. See Stephan Grotz, *Negationen des Absoluten: Meister Eckhart, Cusanus, Hegel* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2009), 119–228.

4. *De non aliud*, chap. 1, p. 5, lines 6–7 [no. 5]. [*God as Not-Other*, 1110.]

5. *De non aliud*, chap. 1, p. 4, line 10–p. 5, line 5 [no. 3–5]. [*God as Not-Other*, 1109–10.]

6. *De non aliud*, chap. 6, p. 13, lines 25–28 [no. 20]. [*God as Not-Other*, 1118.]

Instead of being an instance of otherly negation, absolute negation exceeds otherly negation. For Nicholas, the crucial task of this double negation is to reveal the superessential transcendence of the Absolute. The not-other relates differently to the existence of that which exists because it itself is *indifferent*.⁷ That is to say, the Absolute draws its difference to everything else not from otherly negation but from indifference. The not-other is no otherly negation of an otherly negation; it is a non-otherly negation of an otherly negation. If both forms of negation were logically equivalent, the negation of the otherly negation would be an otherly negation of difference.⁸ But not-other is not *different from* every difference; it is *indifferent to* every difference. Through this indifference the Absolute is 'different' from every other thing.⁹ Indifference mirrors double negation without aiming at mere identity.

This is why, according to Nicholas, the Absolute cannot be understood simply as an otherly, privative, or finite negation that exists in a relation of opposition; it is 'purified' form of negation. Accordingly, not-other expresses *pure* and superessential negation.¹⁰ In Nicholas's philosophy the negatively formulated not-other has clear priority over all other concepts, including the concept of God as "the same" (*idem*). This affirmative expression fails in every way to describe not-other.¹¹ Therefore, not-other is not, as Werner Beierwaltes puts it, a "pure affirmation."¹² A double negation equivalent to a pure affirmation would adulterate the not-other as a concept of God.

The double negation of not-other 'determines' God as Absolute self-referentiality. Because the Absolute is indifferent to all other things, it cannot

7. See Cürsgen, "Die Metaphysik der Negativität und Identität bei Nikolaus von Kues," 358.

8. See Grotz, *Negationen des Absoluten*, 216–17.

9. As Nicholas puts it in *De visione dei*, God is "otherness without otherness." See Nicholas of Cusa, *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia*, vol. 6, *De visione dei*, ed. Heide Dorothea Riemann (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2000), no. 75, lines 1–2. [*The Vision of God*, in *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*, 715.]

10. See Burkhard Mojsisch, "Nichts und Negation: Meister Eckhart und Nikolaus von Kues," in *Historia Philosophiae Medii Aevi: Studien zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters: Festschrift für Kurt Flasch zu seinem 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Burkhard Mojsisch and Olaf Pluta (Amsterdam: B.R. Grüner, 1991), 687–91.

11. Nicholas writes, "Qualitercumque autem dixeris, cum id ipsum, quod dicis, non aliud sit quam idem ipsum, patet 'non aliud' simplicius et prius esse per aliudque ineloquibile atque inexpressibile" (*De non aliud*, chap. 4, p. 9, lines 4–6 [no. 11]). ["Regardless of what words you use: since that of which you speak is not other than the self-same thing, it is evident that Not-other is simpler and prior and is inexpressible and unutterable in [any] other [terms] (*God as Not-Other*, 1113).] See also Nicholas of Cusa, *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia*, vol. 12, *De venatione sapientiae*, ed. Raymund Klíbanký and Hans Gerhard Senger (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1982), chap. 14, no. 41, lines 1–3. [*On the Pursuit of Pure Wisdom*, in *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*, 1304.]

12. See Werner Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2001), 164.

exist in a relation of otherness. The only form of reference for the Absolute is self-reference grounded by negation. Because every possible relation to others is impossible, the Absolute exists in absolute self-referentiality by means of pure negation. The negative structure of not-other expresses this absolute self-referentiality. It represents the highest form of self-determination, as it refers solely and exclusively to itself. Not-other becomes an absolute self-reference only insofar as it remains negative self-reference.

According to Nicholas, the negative self-reference should also be understood as a formulation of the Trinity: "Not-other," writes Nicholas, "is not other than not-other."¹³ In what Dirk Cürsgen calls the "Cusan principle," pure negation is an active self-definition that begins in itself, moves through itself and in itself, and refers to itself.¹⁴ Absolute negation defines itself actively through itself and in this way preserves pure negation as that which defines itself. Here Nicholas describes the indifference of Unity and Trinity that articulates itself in the twofold repetition of not-other. The twofold repetition of not-other is nothing other than the self-definition of not-other as pure negation: not-other is the beginning, middle and end of its self-definition.¹⁵ From this perspective, the Cusan principle and not-other are impossible to distinguish. The trine self-definition presumes the concept of non-other no more than not-other presumes the trine self-definition, yet the latter manifests itself in the Cusan principle. Both not-other and the trine self-definition, therefore, signify the same thing. One can ultimately claim that not-other is at once Unity and Trinity, Trinity and Unity.¹⁶ In this we see the unlimited freedom of the Absolute. True freedom cannot be reached when captured in difference. The Absolute is free because it is negatively unlimited, liberated from the relation of otherness and bounded references. The negation of otherly negation is the purified and purifying form of negation that shows the Absolute as an unlimited being. Only as pure negation can the Absolute be independent of all derivatives. Freedom is a concept grounded by absolute negation: only through negation can freedom be absolute.

13. *De non aliud*, chap. 5, p. 12, lines 11–27 [no. 18]. [*God as Not-Other*, 1116–17.] See also *De non aliud*, chap. 1, p. 4, lines 29–30 [no. 4]; chap. 21, p. 50, lines 8–9 [no. 95]; prop. III, p. 61, lines 9–10 [no. 114]; prop. VI, p. 61, line 20 [no. 115]; prop. XIII, p. 63, lines 13–14 [no. 119]. [*God as Not-Other*, 1109; 1153; 1161, 1163.] *De venantione sapientiae*, chap. 14, no. 40, lines 4–5; chap. 14, no. 40, line 12. [*On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, 1303.]

14. See Cürsgen, *Die Logik der Unendlichkeit*, 93. The relevant passage in *De non aliud* can be found in chap. 5, p. 13, lines 17–21 [no. 19]. [*God as Not-Other*, 1117.]

15. See *De non aliud*, chap. 5, p. 13, lines 17–21 [no. 19]. [*God as Not-Other*, 1117–18.] Cf. chap. 5, p. 12, lines 15–27 [no. 18]. [*God as Not-Other*, 1116–17.]

16. See *De non aliud*, chap. 5, p. 12, lines 22–27 [no. 18]. [*God as Not-Other*, 1117.]

II

In Nicholas's philosophy, negative self-reference is more than an attribute of the Absolute; it is the transcendental principle—the transcendental cause—of all things. For transcending negation is not privative negation but creative negation. But how can the double negation be the ground of all things? If the Absolute is pure self-referentiality, how can it create everything else? Above I explain that, for Nicholas, the Absolute, in its self-referential act of definition, negates all being and posits all being externally. This formulation might suggest a delineation through otherness, but since the Absolute has no form of reference other than a self-reference, the reference to its derivatives cannot be imagined as a relation of externality, or otherness. The Absolute's creative reference to its derivatives is nothing else than a self-reference.

By virtue of its negative self-referentiality, the Absolute conditions all else. The Absolute represents an original power that, as concrete self-referentiality, places everything else in concrete self-reference. Crucially, not-other defines the essence of that which exists, determining its quiddity.¹⁷ Through the definition of not-other, everything that exists becomes a not-other vis-à-vis itself, or, as Nicholas writes, "other is not other than other."¹⁸ Every *other* refers to itself in a relationship of not-otherness. Through this self-reference the other obtains its own essence and the individual being becomes restricted to itself. When Nicholas describes negation as the ground of affirmation, he defines the grounding negation as negative self-reference.¹⁹ The ground of affirmation is not mere negation; only a negative self-reference provides the foundation for delineation and determination through otherness. In this way, the relationality of that which exists becomes visible. Each being's relation of otherness to others is grounded by the negative self-relation of every being conditioned by the Absolute. The concrete negative self-reference thus points primarily to the autonomy of each individual being from other individual beings. In comparison, the other *others* contribute nothing to the essence of the other to be defined. *These* others are accidental determinations in relation to the others awaiting definition. This reveals the reason for the delineability of others in the Absolute and shows how every individual being can, by being defined by the Absolute, be a specific negation as negative self-relation. The essential difference to the individual being is inscribed in its essence, and through this it is what it is. It should be noted that this essential difference—the 'other-ness' of the others—is the expression of the specific

17. See *De non aliud*, chap. 1, p. 5, lines 1–5 [no. 5]. [*God as Not-Other*, 1109.]

18. *De non aliud*, chap. 21, p. 50, lines 10–11 [no. 95]. [*God as Not-Other*, 1153.] Cf. *De non aliud*, chap. 1, p. 5, lines 1–3 [no. 5]. [*God as Not-Other*, 1109.]

19. See *De non aliud*, prop. XVI, p. 63, lines 34–35 [no. 121]. [*God as Not-Other*, 1164.] See also *De venatione sapientiae*, chap. 22, no. 64, lines 13–16. [*On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, 1318–19.]

not-otherness of the individual being. As a concrete not-other, the individual being is posited through its negation as otherly negation, and as such part of a relational whole, or the universe. Every specific not-other is a specific negation in itself, determined through and as self-reflexive negation. This negation guides the eye of the spirit to the determination of the “whatness” of the individual being. According to Nicholas, negation is affirmation, the real determination of the individual’s quiddity. The affirmation, by contrast, merely simulates an affirmative function. The true affirmation of individual beings is negation. Only as negation do they gain a position, for every other is primarily a negative self-relation. On this basis, every individual being shows itself as positivity grounded by inner negation. When the individual refers to its essence by virtue of not-other, it is limited in itself. In this way, that which exists excludes all that is other to it. The Absolute, by contrast, also refers to itself, but does not limit itself in its self-reference. In its self-reference it remains not-other *par excellence* and the unquestionable condition for every concrete self-reference. The Absolute is absolute not-other, absolute indifference, while the others are concrete not-others, concrete indifferences. The Absolute refers—even as universal definition—only to itself, but in this way also unfolds its creative power. The all-defining power of the Absolute consists in its self-reference, whose inherent power draws every being to itself. The Absolute is, so to speak, the ‘point of absolute gravitation’ whose self-referentiality contains a power through which everything can be contracted to a concrete other. Nicholas uses the negative self-referentiality of the Absolute produced by indifference to conceive of the transcendence and first-principle-function (*Prinzipfunktion*) of the Absolute as one. For this reason we must reject Werner Beierwaltes’s aspectual differentiation of the not-other as absolute transcendence and as essence of things.²⁰

III

A principle of Cusan philosophy is that, for the human mind, the Absolute is unreachable and utterly unspeakable at the same time that it serves as the condition of every act of cognition. Human beings can regard the Absolute as the condition of all things—as it relates to others and with others—but never in itself. As we have seen, Nicholas’s concept of not-other describes the intimate connection of the Absolute to its derivatives. In the words of Kurt Flasch, the conceptual form of not-other “takes up” the other.²¹ The conceptually emphasized and verbally comprehensible link between the

20. See Werner Beierwaltes, *Identität und Differenz* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1980), 162, 165.

21. See Kurt Flasch, *Die Metaphysik des Einen bei Nikolaus von Kues: Problemgeschichtliche Stellung und systematische Bedeutung* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 281–82.

Absolute and the other is a decisive aspect of Cusan metaphysics. To know, the human mind always relies on that which exists, but the human mind can only comprehend the Absolute at the conceptual level. The idea of not-other is a mentally immanent concept of the Absolute (*Begriff*), not the Absolute itself. Human beings cannot free themselves from concepts. Rather, Nicholas believes that the human mind can only approach the Absolute asymptotically with the help of enigmas. The not-other is a concept of the Absolute devised by human intellect. Not-other is, to use a visual metaphor, only the street that leads to the city. But the street does not bear the name of city to which it leads. Hence, not-other shows us the path to God but does not indicate *the* name of God.²²

Though we cannot sufficiently know the Absolute, our concept of the Absolute is no illusion. The human mind can know the Absolute as pure negation, and the concept of not-other reveals the pure negation of the Absolute.²³ The Absolute is glimpsed in every being's perception because it is always its precondition. By looking at the quiddity of others, the human mind can know the concrete not-otherness of other *others*. Moreover, the human mind, by looking into itself, knows its own not-otherness. Through this view of others and themselves, human beings behold the ground and the precondition of not-otherness. According to Nicholas, by recognizing the essence of things and our own self-consciousness, we become conscious of our dependence on the Absolute. In this way, the human mind knows the Absolute itself as pure negation in *not-other*—in other words, in the negative expression of purified negation.

The precision of this Cusan concept is striking. Sometimes it seems as if Nicholas demands more from not-other than it can deliver as a concept, which is why he calls it the "Absolute Concept."²⁴ Nicholas appears to believe that non-other can cross the "wall of paradise" and arrive at the Absolute.²⁵ Yet, for all that, the man-made term *not-other* remains an enigma.

We can resolve some of these tensions by seeing in the non-other and its self-determination a conceptual reference to the unobtainable preconditions of conceptual thought. We might put it this way: not-other presumes the not-other's self-determination, and the not-other's self-determination presumes not-other. This looks like a logical problem, but for Nicholas it is only an apparent one. He seeks to set the boundaries of the concept of the Absolute while pointing to the precondition of conceptual thought in the Absolute itself. On the one hand, the concept of not-other refers beyond itself to the

22. See *De non aliud*, chap. 2, p. 6, lines 12–16 [no. 7]. [*God as Not-Other*, 1111.]

23. See *De non aliud*, chap. 9, p. 19, lines 20–21 [no. 32]. [*God as Not-Other*, 1123–24.]

24. *De non aliud*, chap. 20, p. 49, lines 20–21 [no. 94]. [*God as Not-Other*, 1152.]

25. *De visione dei*, no. 37, line 9. [*The Vision of God*, 697.]

absolute precondition; on the other hand, it shows that it, as a concept, is the beginning and end of absolute conceptual determination. Not-other is the conceptual attempt to understand both the inconceivability of pure negation and the productive ignorance of the Absolute.²⁶ Not-other remains an interpretation of pure negation, but it can also liberate the active negation of the Absolute from otherness and privation. Using this concept of negation, Nicholas ultimately manages to forge a reference to the all-defining God, for embedded in the not-other are the notions of the Absolute's unboundedness and freedom. The human mind perceives the concept of not-other and sees the Absolute speculatively (*in speculo*).²⁷

In the speculation of the concept of not-other, the human mind recognizes that the Absolute "is everywhere easy to find" *because* the Absolute shows itself everywhere as the negative primal condition of things.²⁸ The Absolute reveals itself insofar as it shows itself as pure negation. Indeed, the concept of non-other elucidates the transcendence and first-principle-function of the Absolute more precisely than affirmative notions can, for not-other is, as the expression of pure negation, the principle of all affirmative concepts and all transcendentals.²⁹ If the negative concept of the Absolute is more precise than every affirmative concept, then this is true of Christian dogmata as well. As Nicholas argues, the Trinity can be better understood in the negative self-reference of the Absolute than in the threefold concept of father-son-holy spirit.³⁰ Nicholas requires only a single negative self-reference to explain the transcendence, trinity, and creative activity of the Absolute. The strength of Nicholas's trine formulation "not-other is not other than not-other" lies in its ability to express the Trinity negatively and henologically without ontologizing it, thus fully preserving the absolute transcendence of God. For his part, Kurt Flasch has been one of the most vocal critics of Nicholas's negative theology. But as I show, his aversion to negative theology is completely unfounded.³¹ Through *negative* self-reference, Nicholas *de-ontologizes* the Trinity and creative activity of the Absolute and in this way perceives it as absolute transcendence.

26. See *De non aliud*, chap. 20, p. 49, lines 24–27 [no. 94]. [*God as Not-Other*, 1152–53.]

27. See *De non aliud*, chap. 8, p. 18, lines 10–16 [no. 30]. [*God as Not-Other*, 1122.]

28. See Nicholas of Cusa, *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia*, vol. 12, *De apice theoriae*, ed. Raymund Klibansky and Hans Gerhard Senger (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1982), no. 5, lines 12–13. [*Concerning the Loftiest Level of Contemplative Reflection*, in *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*, 1425.]

29. See *De non aliud*, chap. 4, p. 10, lines 3–29 [no. 13–14]. [*God as Not-Other*, 1114–15.]

30. See *De non aliud*, chap. 5, p. 13, lines 4–7 and 14–17 [no. 19]. [*God as Not-Other*, 1117.]

31. See Flasch, *Die Metaphysik des Einen bei Nikolaus von Kues*, 320–27 and Davide Monaco, *Deus trinitas: Dio come non altro nel pensiero di Nicolò Cusano* (Roma: Città Nuova, 2010), 297.

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