

The Faces of Possibility in Nicholas of Cusa's *De visione Dei*¹

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Abstract

While Nicholas of Cusa's employment of the philosophical category of *posse* (possibility, power, potentiality) in his mature writings on God is well known and oft treated in secondary literature, his use of this theme in earlier writings is less widely studied. This article traces Cusa's utilization of *posse* in *De visione Dei* (1453), a mid-career mystical work. After a brief overview of the treatise and the semantic iterations of *posse* therein, it is argued that, in *De visione Dei*, *posse* is associated primarily with the relationally mediated transformation or development of the contemplative self figured by the text.

1. Introduction

Fifteenth century German Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa regularly calls on the theme of *posse* (possibility, power, or potentiality) as a symbol for God, creatures, and the relation between them. Already in *De docta ignorantia* (1440) Cusa describes God as 'so one that [God] is, actually, everything which is possible'.² In another early work, *De filiatione Dei*

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² '*Deus ita est unus, ut sit actu omne id, quod possibile est*'. Nicholas of Cusa, *De docta ignorantia* (hereafter *DDI*), I.5, 30-31 (h I, 12). This formulation anticipates Cusa's later doctrine of God as '*possest*', the union of *posse* (to be possible) and *est* (to be or to exist). As Leinkauf has demonstrated, the idea that existence and possibility are co-eternal in God was presaged in the medieval theological and metaphysical tradition, especially in Bonaventure's thought. Thomas Leinkauf, 'Nicolaus Cusanus und Bonaventura: Zum Hintergrund von Cusanus' Gottesname "Possest"', *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales*, 72 (2005), 113–32.

(1445), he points to the ubiquity and ultimacy of *posse*: ‘Therefore, if you look carefully you will find, in all things, power and its modes’.³ As Cusa’s thought matures, the notion of possibility takes on ever more importance. Indeed, as Johannes Hoff has recently noted, in Cusa’s later writings ‘actualized possibility’ (*possest*) and ‘possibility itself’ (*posse ipsum*) are the ‘disclosing horizon’ which ‘directs our sense for what is significant’.⁴

In his final work, *De apice theoriae* (1464), Cusa presents contemplation of *posse ipsum* as the most fitting name for ‘that without which nothing whatsoever can be, or live, or understand’,⁵ the sight of which constitutes the apex of the mystical theological path. *De apice* is also part retrospective: Cusa suggests that the attentive reader of his works will find the position he now holds to be present in certain of his prior writings.⁶

A note on citations: All references to Nicholas of Cusa’s works are based on the Heidelberg Academy edition: *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner). Citations follow this format: book (if applicable), chapter number (if applicable), section/paragraph number (if applicable and preceded by a # sign), and line number(s). This is followed by volume and page number(s) in parentheses. The above citation, then, refers to *De docta ignorantia*, book one, chapter five, lines thirty to thirty-one in volume one, page twelve. Another example: *De visione Dei* (hereafter *DvD*) V, #13.10-14 (h VI, 17) refers to *De visione Dei*, chapter five, paragraph/section thirteen, lines ten through fourteen in volume six, page seventeen. Unless otherwise noted, English translations of *De docta ignorantia*, *De visione Dei*, and *De apice theoriae* are from H. Lawrence Bond, *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings* (New York, NY and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), while English translations of all other of Cusa’s treatises are from Jasper Hopkins, *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*, 2 vols., (Minneapolis, MN: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2001).

³ He continues: ‘So power is one thing which in all things is all things; and all things participate in it in their own manner’. (*In omnibus igitur, si attendis, vim et eius reperis modum. Unum est igitur, quod in omnibus est omnia, quae id ipsum modo suo participant*’.) *De filiatione Dei* (hereafter *DfD*) V, #82.1-3 (h IV, 58).

⁴ Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 20. For an examination of the theme of *posse* across Cusa’s corpus, see Jasper Hopkins, ‘Cusanus und die sieben Paradoxa von posse’, in *Nikolaus von Kues: De venatione sapientiae, MFCG 32* (Paulinus, 2010), 67-82. For a study of Cusa’s notion of *possest* as it relates to Aristotelian and Thomistic understandings of actuality and possibility, as well as notions of possibility in modern and post-modern hermeneutical and phenomenological philosophy (e.g., Heidegger, Gadamer), see Peter J. Casarella, ‘Nicholas of Cusa and the Power of the Possible’, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 64 (1990): 7-34.

⁵ ‘*Videbis infra posse ipsum, quo nihil potentius nec prius nec melius esse potest, longe aptius norninare illud, sine quo nihil quicquam potest nec esse nec vivere nec intelligere[.]*’ *De apice theoriae* (hereafter *DA*) #5.1-3 (h XII, 120).

⁶ *DA*, #16.1-10 (h XII, 130).

Among the three treatises he mentions is *De icona* or *De visione Dei* (1453, hereafter *DvD*),⁷ one of his most eloquent (and well-known) pieces in which the journey toward union with God is figured with keen philosophical sophistication and intricate poeticism. On Cusa's own account, *DvD* richly presages his understanding of God as *posse ipsum*, possibility itself. Moreover, as several scholars have noted,⁸ *DvD* also prefigures Cusa's notion of God as actualized possibility (*possest*)⁹ as elucidated in his *Triologus de possest* (1460) and *De venatione sapientiae* (1462).

DvD has been much analyzed,¹⁰ and enjoys a particularly popular place in contemporary theology and philosophy.¹¹ Yet, despite the fact that Cusa himself

⁷ The other treatises Cusa mentions are *De dato lumine* (*On the Gift of Light*)—a reference to *De dato patris luminum*, written in 1445 or 1446—and *De quaerendo deum* (*On Seeking God*), written in 1445.

⁸ Werner Beierwaltes, 'Mystische Elemente im Denken des Cusanus', in *Deutsche Mystik im abendländischen Zusammenhang* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2000), 425–48, at 439; Bernard McGinn, 'Seeing and Not Seeing: Nicholas of Cusa's *De Visione Dei* in the History of Western Mysticism', in *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*, ed. by Peter J. Casarella (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 26–53, at 48.

⁹ 'Actualized possibility' is Jasper Hopkins' translation of Cusa's term, *possest*. Another way of rendering *possest* in English is 'the-actual-existence-of-possibility'. *De possest* (hereafter *DP*) # 12-14 (h XI, 14-18); Cf. Hopkins, 'Notes to *De Possest*', Vol. 2 (Minneapolis, MN: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2001), 959 n. 23.

¹⁰ Here are some key treatments of the text: H. Lawrence Bond, 'The "Icon" and the "Iconic Text" in Nicholas of Cusa's *De Visione Dei* I-XVII"', in *Nicholas of Cusa and His Age: Intellect and Spirituality* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 177–97; Beierwaltes, 'Mystische Elemente im Denken des Cusanus'; Werner Beierwaltes, '*Visio Facialis*: Sehen ins Angesicht: Zur Coincidenz des endlichen und unendlichen Blicks bei Cusanus', in *Das Sehen Gottes nach Nikolaus von Kues*, ed. by Rudolf Haubst, *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft*, 18 (Trier: Paulinus-Verlag, 1989), 91–124; Dino Buzzetti, 'Nicholas of Kues and the *Eicona Dei*', in *In the Image of God: Foundations and Objections Within the Discourse on Human Dignity*, ed. by Alberto Melloni and Riccardo Saccenti (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2010), 315–31; F. Edward Cranz, 'Bibliographic Background to *De Visione Dei* of Cusanus', in *Nicholas of Cusa and the Renaissance*, ed. by Thomas M. Izbicki and Gerald Christianson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 207–16; Michel De Certeau, 'The Gaze Nicholas of Cusa', trans. Catherine Porter, *Diacritics*, 17 (1987), 2–38; Louis Dupré, 'The Mystical Theology of Nicholas of Cusa's *De Visione Dei*', in *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church*, ed. by Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 205–20; M.L. Führer, 'The Consolation of Contemplation in Nicholas of Cusa's *De Visione Dei*', in *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church*, ed. by Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 221–40; Alois Maria Haas, *Deum Mistice Videre—in Caligine Coincidence: Zum Verhältnis Nikolaus' von Kues Zur Mystik*, Vorträge der Aeneas-Silvius-Stiftung an der Universität Basel, 24 (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1989); Walter Haug, 'Die Mauer des Paradieses: Zur Mystica Theologia des Nicolaus Cusanus in *De Visione Dei*', *Theologische Zeitschrift*, 45 (1989), 216–30; Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Dialectical Mysticism* (Minneapolis, MN: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1985); McGinn, 'Seeing and Not Seeing'; Clyde Lee Miller, 'The Icon and the Wall: *Visio* and *Ratio* in Nicholas of Cusa's *De Visione Dei*', *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Society*, 64 (1990), 86–98; Clyde Lee Miller,

mentions it, the salience of *posse* in *DvD* is a point that Cusa scholars regularly overlook.¹² But we do well to inquire into the instantiations of *posse*, both implicit and explicit, in *DvD*. How does this motif show itself in the treatise's form and content? How does it influence (and how is it influenced by) other of the text's key characteristics? What, in other words, is the 'face' of *posse* in *DvD*?

In this article, I argue that the primary manifestation of *posse* in *DvD* is the second-personally mediated redemptive transformation or development of the self of the contemplator. Otherwise put, my suggestion is that, in *DvD*, Nicholas of Cusa presents the divine *posse*—'the "Can" before, behind, and present in all that "is"'¹³—as made manifest experientially (*experimentaliter*) in the relational dynamisms by which the self enters more and more into its 'best possible mode of existence'¹⁴ with and in the gaze of God and others. These dynamisms are both described and performed in the text.

2. *De visione Dei*: History, Form, Theology

A brief sketch of *DvD*'s historical context, literary structure, and major theological themes will prepare the way for a more in-depth investigation of the question of *posse* in the treatise.

'Nicholas of Cusa's *The Vision of God*', in *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, ed. by Paul Szarmach (Albany: State University of New York, 1984), 293–312.

¹¹ For example: Hoff, *The Analogical Turn*; Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001); Catherine Keller, *The Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); David Tracy, 'The Post-modern Renaming of God as Incomprehensible and Hidden', *Cross Currents* 50, no. 1-2 (2000), 240-247. Also, as evidenced in his recent plenary address at a May, 2015 meeting of the *American Cusanus Society* entitled 'The Question of the Icon in Nicholas of Cusa', Jean-Luc Marion has recently turned his attention to Cusa's *DvD*.

¹² I am aware of no essay or monograph that looks specifically at the theme of *posse* in *DvD*.

¹³ H. Lawrence Bond, 'Introduction [to Nicholas of Cusa]', in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 1-84, at 57.

¹⁴ *Ita enim tu, domine, intueris quodlibet, quod est, ut non possit concipi per omne id, quod est, te aliam curam habere, quam ut id solum sit meliori modo, quo esse potest, atque quod omnia alia, quae sunt, ad hoc solum sint, ut serviant ad id, quod illud sit optime, quod tu respicis*. *DvD* IV, # 9.16-20 (h VI, 14).

In the early summer of 1452, Nicholas of Cusa visited the Benedictine monastery of St. Quirin in Tegernsee while traveling from abbey to abbey in his reform efforts as the newly installed Bishop of Brixen. While there, he struck up a warm, intellectually vibrant relationship with Abbot Kaspar Ayndorffer, Prior Bernard von Waging, and the brothers. The close connection between Cusa and the Tegernsee community, born of a shared zeal for the contemplative life, was nurtured throughout the 1450's by regular written correspondence on the topic of mystical theology.¹⁵

Letters from 1452 and 1453 reveal that the monks wished for Cusa to weigh in on some questions concerning mystical theology's essential nature and means of realization—questions that were, at the time, hotly debated.¹⁶ So Cusa promised them a book¹⁷ designed to lead them into mystical theology by way of a certain 'sensible experience' (*sensibili experimento*) involving an image of an all-seeing face.¹⁸ By means of meditative engagement with the painted visage that seems to see 'both all at once and

¹⁵ Four hundred and fifty-four of these letters have been preserved in Munich's *Staatsbibliothek*. Of these, only a handful have been edited and released. Thirty-six appear in Edmond Vansteenbergh, 'La correspondance de Nicolas de Cuse avec Gaspard Aindorffer et Bernarde de Waging', in *Autour de la docteur ignorance: Une controverse sur la théologie mystique au XV^e siècle*, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1915), XIV. Some of the letters have been translated from Latin into French and German. K.M. Ziebart and David Albertson are currently at work on an English translation.

¹⁶ The monks were especially keen for Cusa to address the so-called *intellectus-affectus* controversy, which involved disagreement over whether knowledge, or love, or both together (and in what order) best define the essence of mysticism in the Dionysian tradition. Jean Gerson (1363-1429) had argued that both love and knowledge play a role in prayerful mystical contemplation; for Gerson, mystical theology is a matter of 'the highest possible mental and intellectual affection', transcending all sense-based, cognitive, and theoretical power. The Carthusian Vincent of Aggsbach (1389-1464) had denounced Gerson's approach with vitriol, arguing instead that affect (over and against any kind of intellectuality) is of primary import in the journey toward union with God. Among Cusa scholars, the general consensus seems to be that Cusa espoused an integration of *affectus* and *intellectus* in the mystical journey. Some scholars read this integration as leaning to the side of *affectus* (e.g., Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism: Gregory the Great through the Twelfth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1994)) while others regard it as tending in the direction of *intellectus* (K.M. Ziebart, *Nicolaus Cusanus on Faith and the Intellect: A Case Study in 15th-Century Fides-Ratio Controversy*, *Studies in Intellectual History Series*, Vol. 225 (Leiden: Brill, 2014)). Ziebart's study nicely surfaces the political dimensions of this controversy.

¹⁷ Cusa originally intended the material that constitutes *DvD* to be a chapter in *De theologis complementis*. Ultimately it appears he decided not to insert the chapter, but rather, to let the work stand alone.

¹⁸ That is, one of those paintings, popular in the Renaissance, which depicts a face whose eyes seem to rest on the viewer from whatever angle the painting is observed.

singulars singularly’, human fragility would be afforded an opportunity to assist itself (*iuvare se*) to a vision of the transcendent.¹⁹

In late 1453, Cusa’s treatise arrived at Tegernsee along with the accompanying painting. The subject matter of the work, the ‘beloved brothers’ (*dilectissimis fratribus*) are told in the prologue, is the ‘*facilitas*’ of mystical theology—that is, mystical theology’s ability, accessibility, or capacity. Cusa’s stated aim is to ‘lead you experientially into the most sacred darkness (*experimentaliter in sacratissimam obscuritatem manuducere*)’²⁰ in such a way that

each of you, in the measure granted him by God, will of himself endeavor to draw continuously nearer [to the inaccessible light], and in this place to foretaste, by a most delicious sampling, that feast of eternal happiness to which we have been called in the Word of Life through the Gospel of the ever blessed Christ.²¹

From the outset, it is clear that the treatise’s words are crafted in such a way that readers’ encounter with them might present an opportunity not only for insight, but also for transformation.²² In this vein, H. Lawrence Bond speaks of the ‘iconicity’ of the text,

¹⁹ Vansteenbergh, ‘La correspondance de Nicolas de Cuse’, 116.

²⁰ In light of our focus on *posse*, it is interesting to note that the verb Cusa here employs (*manuducere*, to lead by the hand), is closely related to the noun *manus*, meaning ‘power’, ‘potency’, ‘drive’, or ‘energy’.

²¹ ‘*quisque ex se temptabit modo, quo sibi a deo concedetur, continue propius accedere et hic praegustare quodam suavissimo libamine cenam illam aeternae felicitatis, ad quam vocati svimus in verbo vitae per evangelium Christi semper benedicti*’. *DvD*, prologue, #1.4, 5, 12-13, 14-17 (h VI, 3-4).

²² Oliver Davies has explored ways in which, for medieval thinkers like Meister Eckhart (whose works significantly influenced Nicholas of Cusa), words were seen to have a profound ‘materiality’, along with a powerful capacity not just to convey spiritual or intellectual truths, but ‘to change other human beings’ in the process. Oliver Davies, ‘On Reading Medieval Mystics Today’, in *Exploring Lost Dimensions in Christian Mysticism: Opening to the Mystical*, ed. Louise Nelstrop and Simon D. Podmore (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 31–50, at 36, 37. It is thus not surprising that, in many of his works, Cusa explicitly indicates to readers his hope that his written words will occasion a transforming experience of the truths those very words seek to express. In other words, he hopes readers will come to know in themselves the mysteries he himself gropes to name. (See, e.g., *DDI*, prologue (h I, 1-2); *De coniecturis*, prologue # 4. 1-19 (h III, 5-6), II.17, # 184. 1-5 (h III, 183); *DfD* II, # 55. 1-9 (h IV, 42); *De Beryllo* # 1. 5-7 (h XI, 3)). Intriguingly, Iris Wikström interprets this Cusan custom of direct address to readers as evidence of an irreducibly relational theoretical outlook—what she calls Cusa’s ‘I-you philosophy’. Iris Wikström, ‘Nicholas of Cusa on Self as the Sign of Coincidence of Being and Knowing’, in *Nicholas of Cusa on the*

and the contemplative experience to which the reading of it gives rise. *DvD* ‘is crafted to “picture” by its own rhetorical form and with a variety of linguistic devices so as not merely to “signify” but, in the manner of icons, to transpose the reader... from one contemplative state to another’.²³ In *DvD*, the process and term of contemplation are now juxtaposed, now elided, so that, as Louis Dupré argues, the reader’s own experience of dynamic transformation becomes a vital religious symbol.²⁴ The text thus comes to figure and conjure the God of which it speaks. So too, the experience of the implied reader or contemplator becomes a locus of divine self-manifestation.²⁵

The treatise’s twenty-five chapters may be divided into three main sections.²⁶ In the first part (preface, chapters 1-3), the monks are instructed to participate in a communal exercise—a ‘paraliturgy’, as Bernard McGinn puts it²⁷—revolving (literally) around the icon Cusa sent with the treatise to Tegernsee. Here the idea is for the brothers to be astonished by the paradoxes of infinity as they experience and reflect together on how the painted gaze appears to be present to each monk individually, and yet follows them all simultaneously as they process before it in opposite directions.

Self and Self-Consciousness, ed. Walter Andreas Euler, Ylva Gustafsson, and Iris Wikström (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2010), 155–185.

²³ Bond, ‘The “Icon” and the “Iconic Text”’, 183.

²⁴ Louis Dupré, ‘Prolegomena to Nicholas of Cusa’s Theory of Religious Symbols’, in *Nicholas of Cusa and His Age: Intellect and Spirituality*, ed. by Thomas Izbicki and Christopher Billitto (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 19–28, at 26–7.

²⁵ Bond goes so far as to posit that what emerges in the text is ‘God as Absolute Infinity, not as philosophic hypothesis nor as concept, but... “contemplative experience”’. Bond, ‘The “Icon” and the “Iconic Text”’, 189.

²⁶ While scholars dispute the exact placement of *DvD*’s literary seams, it is generally agreed that, after the preface and first introductory chapters, the treatise divides roughly into two distinct but complementary parts. For two slightly different (but probably equally valid) treatments of the text’s literary configuration, see Miller, ‘Nicholas of Cusa’s the Vision of God’, 306–7, and McGinn, ‘Seeing and Not Seeing’, 42.

²⁷ McGinn, ‘Seeing and Not Seeing’, 39.

The monks' shared, embodied, and mutually attested experience of the icon's apparently all-seeing gaze stands as the 'zero degree'²⁸ of the treatise's body, which is written in the second person voice as a prayer meant to be spoken by the *frater contemplator*. The first half of this prayer (part two of the treatise, chapters 4 – 16) places thematic accent on divine infinity. It consists of extended meditations on the opposite yet coinciding (thus, ultimately unthinkable and unnameable) relationship between the divine Absolute on the one hand, and creation with all its vicissitudes and particularities on the other. The second half of the prayer (part three of the treatise, chapters 17 – 25) directs attention to the theme of divine love, with the Christian doctrines of Trinity, incarnation, and *theosis* playing central roles.

Several themes function as unifying threads within the treatise. Arguably the most prominent of these is *visio*—the mystery of divine sight, which, though infinite and ungraspable, is nevertheless intimately present as the necessary and self-evident ground of all things. This topic gets elucidated largely through prayerful reflection on the symbols of the face and the gaze—both of which, by Cusa's time, had long occupied an important place within Christian thought and practice.²⁹

It would probably be a stretch to say that the theme of *posse* is a principal or unifying motif within the text. However, as we shall see, it nevertheless occupies a significant place in the constellation of ideas treated in *DvD*.

²⁸ De Certeau, 'The Gaze Nicholas of Cusa', 11.

²⁹ In mystical theological traditions, the biblical link between face-to-face vision and saving revelation (e.g., 1 Cor. 13:12; 2 Cor. 4:6) had become tightly interwoven with the Neoplatonic emphasis on movement toward the good through simultaneous seeing and being-seen (e.g., Plotinus, *Ennead* V.6.5, as found in *Plotinus V: Ennead V*, trans. A.H. Armstrong, 7 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966-1988)). William of St. Thierry (12th c.), for example, richly develops the theme of divinizing face-to-face vision in his mystical writings. So too, Meister Eckhart (13th-14th c.) calls on the motif of mutual gazing to flesh out his doctrine of the dialectically fused identity between the soul and God.

3. *Posse* in *De visione Dei*: Basic Terms and Their Meanings

Jasper Hopkins, in his helpful study of the ‘paradoxes of *posse*’ in Cusa’s works, notes that Cusa often ‘exchange[s] and juxtapose[s] phrases like “*posse ipsum*”, “*possibilitas ipsa*”, “*potestas absoluta*”, “*omnipotentia*”, and “*potentia infinita*”’.³⁰ It is easy to see this very tendency at play in *DvD*, wherein Cusa calls upon a variety of terms to signify notions of power, possibility, and potentiality. In all, there are twenty instances of *posse* and *possibilis* in the treatise, and nineteen appearances of *potens*, *potentia*, and *potestas*. In addition, the terms *virtu* and *vis*— which both convey meanings of power, strength, and potentiality—are significant: *virtu* appears thirty-six times; *vis*, thirty-one. Sometimes these terms are interchangeable. For instance, when Cusa speaks of *vis absoluta*, *virtus absoluta*, *posse absoluta*, and *potentia absoluta*,³¹ he usually references the same basic meaning—that is, the absolute or infinite creative ground whence all things (both existent and non-existent)³² derive, and in which they are sustained. At other times, the terms carry nuanced differences. For example, while *vis* and *virtu* tend to refer to originating power-of, and are frequently disclosed in the natural world’s growth processes (as in the growth of a tree³³), *posse* and *potest* tend to refer to enabling or enactive power-of, and are often made manifest in in the realm of volition (as in the (cap)ability to love³⁴).

It is also important to note that *posse* and related terms have both divine and creaturely reference points in *DvD*. Words like *potentia infinita* and *vis absoluta*

³⁰ Hopkins, ‘Cusanus und die sieben Paradoxa von posse’, 71-2.

³¹ Respectively: *DvD* VII, # 24.13 (h VI, 26); *DvD* XII, # 48.16 (VI, 42); *DvD* XV, #62. 7, 15 (h VI, 52); *DvD* XV, #61.15 (h VI, 52).

³² Contra the pre-Socratic *Parmenides*, Cusa holds that it is not unreasonable to speak of the reality of non-being. For Cusa (as for Dionysius), non-being both ‘is’ and ‘is not’. Cf Hopkins, ‘Cusanus und die sieben Paradoxa von posse’, 74-5.

³³ *DvD* VII, #22-24 (h XI, 24-26).

³⁴ *DvD* XVII, #71 (h XI, 58).

‘frequently give rich reference to God. However, sometimes they have aspects of created being as their reference point. The back and forth movement between these two levels can be quite sharp’.³⁵ As Frans Maas explains, this is because ‘In the philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa... God’s omnipotence is seen as being not in opposition to, but in continuity with the potency of creation, or rather; the potency of creation is regarded to be continuous with the one Source of that *posse*’[.].³⁶ While Maas’ comment is true and helpful, it only gets us so far. What more can be said about the nature of the relationship between divine and created *posse* in the Cusan text we are considering?

We can observe in *DvD* two basic ways of construing ultimate versus proximate *posse*. Sometimes Cusa draws a marked distinction between power that is absolute or infinite, and power that is created. For example, in chapter seven, wherein we find a meditation on the growth and development of a nut tree,³⁷ God is said to be the ‘power (*vis*) or principle from which all things come’.³⁸ The nut tree and its seed have a ‘seminal power’ (*vis seminis*), but this is clearly distinguished from the divine *vis absoluta*. These two powers, potencies, or principles of becoming do not subsist independently from one another, but rather as *vis* which is infinite plenitude and *vis* which is the image and expression thereof. In discriminating between the fecundity of the creator and that of creation, Cusa presages his doctrine of God as *posse ipsum* or *posse absolutam* (as set forth in *De apice theoriae*), where God is said to be possibility itself, as distinguished from all finite possibility, including prime matter.³⁹

³⁵ Hopkins, ‘Cusanus und die sieben Paradoxa von posse’, 71-72. Translation mine.

³⁶ Frans Maas, ‘Divine Omnipotence in the View of Nicholas of Cusa’, in *Conflict and Reconciliation: Perspectives on Nicholas of Cusa*, ed. by Inigo Bocken (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 177–87, at 179.

³⁷ In the background here is Augustine’s meditation on a nut-tree in *De genesi ad litteram* V.23.

³⁸ ‘*Nam cum tu sis vis illa, domine, seu principium, ex quo omnia[.]*’ *DvD* VII, #22. 5-6 (h VI, 24).

³⁹ However, for Cusa, though prime matter is not God, it is still ‘infinite’ in that it represents the possibility of the emergence of all existent things, in whatever form they happen to take. Prime matter is not infinite in

At other points in *DvD*, however, Cusa professes that there is no greater power than the power of the coincidence between the potential and the real. In this case, the divine *posse* is placed beyond the ‘wall of coincidence’ (*murus coincidentiae*) between possibility and being, where what *can be* and what *is* subsist in a paradoxical unity that is both absolute and absolutely beyond human conceptualization. Here *posse* and *esse* are proximate, while divine ultimacy lies in God’s being (actually) all that (God) can be.⁴⁰ As Cusa elsewhere puts it, ‘nothing can be, which God is not actually’.⁴¹ We find the clearest articulation of this construal in chapter fifteen—arguably the crux of the treatise—wherein God is praised as the one in whom ‘all power to be exists actually’ (*omne posse esse esse actu*). Cusa proceeds prayerfully to aver:

‘[I]n infinite being, the power to be all things is infinite being itself. Similarly, in infinite being, actually being all things is infinite being itself. Therefore, in you, my God, absolute power to be and absolute actual being are only you, my infinite God. You, my God, are all power to be’.⁴²

Infinite being could not *be* if the possibility of its being were not *itself* actual. Infinite possibility of being and infinite actual being are, then, co-eternal.⁴³ Vestiges of this same basic idea are evident, too, in chapter eight, where God’s gaze is said to

an absolute sense (only God is that). But it is, nevertheless, not made, and has no beginning. Cf. Hopkins, ‘Cusanus und die sieben Paradoxa von posse’, 75-77.

⁴⁰ ‘Sometimes Nicholas says that God is everything which is able to be; sometimes he suggests that God is everything which [God] is able to be; and sometimes... what he says may be construed either way, since neither the text nor the context eliminates the ambiguity’ (Jasper Hopkins, ‘Notes on *Actualized-Possibility [De Possesse]*’, in *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis, MN: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2001), 957-8.

⁴¹ ‘*nihil enim esse potest, quod deus actu non sit*’. *DP*, #8.6-7 (h XI, 9). Translation mine. I thank my colleague David Decosimo for his suggestion on how best to render this difficult Cusan phrase. With one minor amendment, I have followed Prof. Decosimo’s advice.

⁴² ‘*Ita posse esse omnia in infinito esse est ipsum infinitum esse. Similiter et actu esse omnia in infinito esse est ipsum infinitum esse. Quare posse esse absolutum et actu esse absolutum in te deo | meo non sunt nisi tu, deus meus infinitus. Omne posse esse tu es, deus meus*’. *DvD XV*, #62. 10-14 (h VI, 52).

⁴³ Cf. *DP*, #14.1-18 (h XI, 17-18).

embrace all *power of seeing* (and power of being-seen), as well as all *actual seeing* that results from them both.⁴⁴ In passages such as these, Cusa places infinite divine *posse* within and beyond the coincidence between *posse* and *esse*—a move that clearly anticipates his doctrine of God as ‘*possest*’ as set forth in his later treatise bearing that name (1460). Thus, already in *DvD*, God is spoken of as the ‘Can-Is’, the being-actual of every possibility—or, what we might (albeit with some poetic license) call ‘infinitely instantiated and instantiating abundance’, or ‘ever-enduring and emerging plenitude’.

Finally, it is important to mention the theme of *impossibility* in *DvD*. This motif appears at junctures in the treatise where the Cusan contemplator has been led to the depths of *docta ignorantia* (learned ignorance), and where knowing thus takes shape not as ratiocination but as *admiratio*—astonishment or wonder that confronts the mind, that unseats the ego: ‘I experience how necessary it is for me to enter into the cloud and to admit the coincidence of opposites, above all capacity of reason, and to seek there the truth where impossibility confronts me’.⁴⁵ In *DvD* (as elsewhere in Cusa’s works), ‘*impossibilitas*’ is often juxtaposed to *necessitas*.⁴⁶ By setting impossibility and necessity into a relation of coincidence, Cusa means to shepherd the contemplator’s mind toward a glimpse of the infinite as lying beyond the aporetic simultaneous co-existence of that which *cannot* be, and that which *must needs* be. It would be difficult to overstress the importance of negation in the Cusan contemplative path; confrontation with impossibility is, paradoxically, what clears the path for the mind’s journey toward God: ‘For you have

⁴⁴ ‘*et doce [me], quomodo visus tuus videt omnem visum videntem et omne visibile et omnem actum visionis et omnem virtutem videntem et omnem virtutem visibilem et omne ex ipsis exurgens videre, quia videre tuum est causare; omnia vides, qui omnia causas*’. *DvD* VIII, #29. 1-5 (h VI, 29).

⁴⁵ ‘*Unde experior, quomodo necesse est me intrare caliginem et admittere coincidentiam oppositorum super omnem capacitatem rationis et quaerere ibi veritatem, ubi occurrit impossibilitas*’ [.] *DvD* IX, #36.1-3 (h VI, 34).

⁴⁶ E.g., *DvD* IX, #36 (h VI, 34); *DvD* IX, #X.42.14-15 (h VI, 38); XIII, #53.12 (h VI, 46).

shown me that you cannot be seen elsewhere than where impossibility confronts and obstructs me.⁴⁷

4. Posse and Selfhood

Having established the import of *posse* in *DvD*, and having traced some of *posse*'s semantic instantiations and basic meanings in the treatise, we are now ready to delve more purposefully into the heart of the main argument of this article. That argument is this: *posse*'s 'face' in *DvD*—in other words, the way it shows itself most poignantly in the treatise—is in the experience of transformation-in-relation to the O/other which belongs to the contemplative self figured by the text. The first step in developing this claim is to show ways in which *posse* is deeply interlaced in Cusa's thought with the formation processes of the human self.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ 'quoniam tu mihi ostendisti te non posse alibi videri quam ubi impossibilitas occurrit et obviat'. *DvD* IX, #37.4-5 (h VI, 34). K.M. Ziebart's recent study of Cusa's mystical theology highlights the role of confrontation (the mortification of the intellect) in the Cusan mystical path. She contends, for instance, that it is precisely in its status as a disturbing 'affront to reason' that the all-seeing icon is, for Cusa, 'an effective tool in the practice of mystical theology'. Ziebart, *Nicolaus Cusanus on Faith and the Intellect*, 193.

⁴⁸ There is of course no Latin equivalent to the English word 'self', which first appeared in the poetic and theatrical works of seventeenth century writers like John Donne and William Shakespeare. As generations of Christian thinkers had done before him, Nicholas of Cusa uses Latin terms such as *anima*, *mens*, *intellectus*, and *spiritus* to refer to human personhood and aspects thereof. For our purposes, it is interesting to note that Cusa's anthropological terminology frequently involves mention of power or potentiality, as in the power of the senses (*vis sensitiva*) or the power of the intellect (*vis intellectus*). As well, since *DvD* is written as a prayer, there is a good deal of self-referential and self-reflexive language in the treatise (e.g., *me*, *mihi*, *ego*), the subtle analysis of which would no doubt reveal many of the nuances in Cusa's thought on the topic of what it means to be human. There is not space to delve into such nuances in the context of this essay. Knowing full well the difficulties that plague the word 'self'—especially when we are talking about a premodern thinker like Cusa, for whom notions of 'selfhood' and 'subjectivity' as commonly understood today would be quite foreign—I nevertheless still choose to utilize this term. As long as its limitations are acknowledged, I think 'self' can function as an umbrella category (vague, but helpfully so) under which each and all of Cusa's various iterations of first-person human experience may find a place.

Let us begin with the straightforward observation that, for Cusa, the human mind (*mens, intellectus*) is the site where the divine *posse* is made most pellucidly manifest.⁴⁹ As he puts it in *De apice*: ‘And thus we experience that *Posse* Itself appears powerfully and incorruptibly in the *posse* of mind’[.]⁵⁰ The close link Cusa draws between the divine *posse* and the capabilities of the human mind has the effect of rendering both more solid and more tenuous the self’s own relation to itself. Jasper Hopkins captures well just this ‘paradox of *posse*’ in Cusa’s thought: ‘Because God is the Absolute Possibility that is the Absolute Power, [God] can give me myself. And I can conversely be so inflamed by the love of Wisdom (which is God) that I lose myself and all things in order to win God’.⁵¹ The self gains and relinquishes itself simultaneously as its own potencies, especially those of the mind, are seen to be finite instantiations of God’s own power and possibility.⁵²

In fact, in Cusa’s thought, the theme of *posse* is deeply entwined with what is perhaps Christianity’s central anthropological claim—namely, that humanity is created in the image of God. The *imago Dei* is for Cusa not a foregone, accomplished state, but an ongoing process in which the self is given over to itself inasmuch as it is given over to God: ‘[H]ow will you give me yourself if you do not also give me myself?... You, O

⁴⁹ Along with many of his predecessors in (Neo)platonian Christian traditions, Nicholas of Cusa emphasizes the revelatory and soteriological import of the human intellect over and above the potentialities of the body. Yet, it cannot be said that Cusa neglects the significance of the body, especially sense perception. In *DvD* XXIV, # 111 (h VI, 84-85) and elsewhere (e.g., *Idiota de mente*, IV, #77 (h V, 60-61)), he states that the ‘higher powers’ of the human (viz., mind, intellect, or soul) are wholly dependent on the body and its sensitive capacities. *De mente* even includes a discussion on arterial functioning, as well as parts of the brain thought to house and facilitate different mental functions (VIII, #114-115 (h V, 83-84)).

⁵⁰ ‘*Et in hoc experimur posse ipsum in posse mentis potenter et incorruptibiliter apparere[.]*’ *DA*, #23. VII (h XII, 133).

⁵¹ ‘*Weil Gott die absolute Möglichkeit ist, die auch die absolute Macht ist, kann er mich mir selber geben; und ich umgekehrt kann so entflammt sein von der Liebe zur Weisheit (die Gott ist), dass ich mich selbst und alle Dinge verliere, um Gott zu gewinnen*’. Hopkins, ‘Cusanus und die sieben Paradoxa von posse’, 81. Translation mine.

⁵² As Hopkins observes, this Cusan paradox is similar to Eckhart’s notion of *abgescheidenheit*, and is tied up within Cusa’s understanding of the Christian doctrine of *theosis*.

Lord, answer me within my heart saying: “Be yours, and I too will be yours”!⁵³ Dino Buzzetti, building upon on this very quotation from *DvD*, says of Cusa’s theology of the *imago Dei*: ‘God gives himself to us and we can unite with him only if we engage ourselves in this endeavor... Apparently, then, the relation that we, as *Imago Dei*, have to God is such that we cannot deal with God, but by dealing with ourselves’.⁵⁴ The God who is infinite possibility-in-actualization, the form of forms (*forma formarum*)⁵⁵ which constitutes the deep structure of creaturely becoming, is imaged as humans actualize their ownmost possibilities. Said another way, my coming-to-be that which I most deeply *am* coincides with my coming-to-reflect (and be ever more united with) the God in whom all possibilities for being, including my being, are enfolded.

There are three aspects of selfhood that, for Cusa, reflect in a special way the unfolding of absolute *Posse* within finite human experience. We find evidence of all three in *DvD*. First, the infinite potency of God is made manifest in and through *developmental processes* that guide creatures, including human selves, toward optimal states of being in the world. God’s gaze, the causal power (*virtus*) of everything,⁵⁶ is praised for looking providentially on all things in such a way that ‘no existing thing can conceive that you have any other care but that it alone exist in the best manner possible for it[.]’⁵⁷ Infinite divine power is thus unfolded in the created power by which each determinate being comes into the mode of existence most fitting for it. As Regine Kather rightly says, for

⁵³ ‘Immo quomodo dabis tui et mihi, si etiam me ipsum non dederis mihi?... tu, domine, intra praecordia mea respondes dicens: Sis tu tuus et ego ero tuus’. *DvD* VII, #25.11-14 (h VI, 26-27).

⁵⁴ Buzzetti., ‘Nicholas of Kues and the Eicon Dei’, 325. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁵ *DvD* XV, #63 (h VI, 53).

⁵⁶ *DvD* VIII, #29.1-5 (h VI, 29).

⁵⁷ ‘Ita enim tu, domine, intueris quodlibet, quod est, ut non possit concipi per omne id, quod est, te aliam curam habere, quam ut id solum sit meliori modo, quo esse potest[.]’ *DvD* IV, # 9. 16-19 (h VI, 14).

Nicholas of Cusa, '[t]he ground of being gives every finite entity its being and the force to strive for its development.'⁵⁸

In *DvD*, this is certainly true in the case of the human, in whom the search for self-realization and the search for God's gaze, face, or 'inaccessible light' coincide.⁵⁹ For Cusa, the transformation process by which humans come to be what they are reflects in a special way the divine *potentia absoluta*. This point becomes especially clear in chapter twenty-four, wherein we find a meditation on the developmental trajectory of a human child—first, its bodily growth (*vis vegetativa*) and use of the senses (*vis sensitiva*); then, its deployment of the imagination (*vis imaginativa*); later, its engagement in logic and reasoning (*vis ratiocinativa*); and finally, its pursuit of spiritual/intellectual truths (*vis intellectiva*).⁶⁰ The dynamic actualization of such (created) potentialities in the human person culminates in the perfecting of the intellectual spirit through filiation or deification.

Such growth and perfection is, for Cusa, a manifestation of both Christic and Pneumatic potentiality. Jesus sows the 'word (or 'seed') of life' that nourishes and vivifies each soul,⁶¹ while the divine Spirit, the 'power of all powers and the perfection of

⁵⁸ Regine Kather, 'Human Identity and Its Relation to Finite and Infinite Being', in *Nicholas of Cusa on the Self and Self-Consciousness*, ed. by Walter Andreas Euler, Ylva Gustafsson, and Iris Wikström (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2010), 89–110, at 95.

⁵⁹ I do not think Knut Alfsvåg overstates things when he avers that the 'basic idea' of *DvD* is that 'human beings realize themselves in the gaze of God'. 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), 295–309, at 302.

⁶⁰ *DvD* XXIV, #109.5-15 (h VI, 83-84).

⁶¹ *DvD* XXIV, #107 (h VI, 82-83); *DvD* XXIV, #109 (h VI, 83); *DvD* XXIV, #112 (h VI, 85). For Cusa, the human soul is '*potentia ad vitam*'—a certain 'potential for life', which is the 'power in act' of the developing body, sense perception, imagination, rationality, and intellect/spirit. (*DvD* XXIV, #109 (h. VI, 83.)) While Cusa emphasizes that the seed of the Word is sown in the 'rational spirit' or 'intellect', he also implies that the perfecting process, which this Christic seminal *potentia* brings about, is a matter of the whole, embodied person: 'For all intellect that attains to perfection reaches it from the sensible world by means of the senses... the more the senses are pure and perfect, the imagination clear, and the discursive reasoning able, the less impeded and the more prompt the intellect is in its intellectual operations'. ('*Omne*

the perfect’, shines like the sun’s rays onto and in the human spirit, and, ‘by the warmth of divine love ripens its potential power... so that fruit is borne that is most acceptable to the Spirit’.⁶² This ‘ripening’ represents equally the person’s humanization (viz., her embodiment of what she most truly *is*)⁶³ and divinization (viz., her growth toward conformity with God’s Son).⁶⁴ Since for Cusa ‘the Son *is* that which the Father *can*’,⁶⁵ the growth of *Christiformitas* in the person amounts to a revelation of God’s absolute *posse*. We are here dealing with what Nancy Hudson, in her treatment of Cusa’s doctrine of *theosis*, aptly calls a ‘disclosure of self within the disclosure of God’.⁶⁶

Creativity is the second feature of human selfhood which, in *DvD*, is closely tied to the disclosure of divine *posse*. As Cusa makes explicit in several of his other treatises, the human mind’s activity of assimilating the world and creating conjectures (or representations) of it is precisely what makes the mind a living image of the Creator.⁶⁷ ‘[I]t is not the mind alone that is the image of God, but humanity’s creative will that organizes the world. Human *activity* and the potential for that activity also comprise the *imago Dei*’.⁶⁸ Humanity’s ability to *make meaning*—to venture new interpretations, to risk new surmises, to seek to grasp truths that ever remain beyond grasping—such actions

enim, quod ad eum pervenit de mundo sensibili, per medium sensuum ad ipsum pergit... Quanto autem sensus fuerit purior et perfectior et imaginatio clarior et discursus melior, tanto intellectus in suis intellectualibus operationibus minus impeditus promptior existit.’) DvD XXIV, #111.8-13 (h VI, 85).

⁶² ‘*Sed quid est hoc, domine, quod immittis in spiritum hominis, quem perficis? Nonne spiritum tuum bonum, qui penitus est in actu virtus omnium virtutum et perfectio perfectorum... ita spirims tuus, deus, venit in spiritum intellectualem boni hominis et calore divinae caritatis decoquit virtualementiam, ut perficiatur et fiat sibi gratissimus fructus’.* DvD, XXV, #115.1-3, 9-11 (h VI, 87).

⁶³ As Frank Maas puts it, in Cusa’s philosophy, that which is most real in created things ‘is not their actual factual being but what they can be. What they are in God, is the most real. God is what all things can be and indeed are on their most profound level’. Maas, ‘Divine Omnipotence’, 182.

⁶⁴ Cf. *DfD*, #53.1-10 (h IV, 40).

⁶⁵ ‘...qui sit omne id quod est ab ipsa omnipotentia patris, ut sit filius omnipotentiae, id scilicet sit quod pater possit: omnipotens sit de absoluto posse seu omnipotente’. DP, #49.20-22 (h XI, 61).

⁶⁶ Nancy J. Hudson, *Becoming God: The Doctrine of Theosis in Nicholas of Cusa* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2007), 118-119.

⁶⁷ See, e.g., *Idiota de mente* III, 72.6-7; h V, 109; *De venatione sapientia* XVII, #50.104 (h XII, 47).

⁶⁸ Hudson, *Becoming God*, 192.

are unfoldings of the possibility-to-make of the human intellect, the ground and sustenance of which is absolute divine power-to-make (*posse facere*). Cusa believes that when humans construct meaning out of basic sensations and perceptions, they both *image* and *share in* divine creative power, possibility, or potentiality.⁶⁹ In his later works,⁷⁰ he places a (Lullian-influenced) trinitarian spin on this basic idea, arguing that the locus of humanity's imaging of and participating in Father, Son, and Spirit lies in the power to make (*posse facere*), the power to be made (*posse fieri*), and the connection between the two (*posse factum* or *posse conexio*).⁷¹

But what about the text we are presently considering? What indication is there in Cusa's *DvD* for the idea that the divine *posse* is made manifest in the creations of the human mind? Certainly this is not a line of thought that is treated explicitly in the treatise. However, when we attend to the text in light of Cusa's claim in his other writings that the human potential to create reflects the fecund *posse* of God, we can see ways in which *posse* is performedly unfolded in the contemplative experience figured by the text. The preface's exercise with the painted icon guides the contemplator in the very act of crafting—in bodily movement, in meditative thought, in mutual attestation—profound

⁶⁹ For Cusa, the potency by which the mind produces meaning participates in the infinite divine potency—the creative power of God. At the beginning of *De coniecturis*, he writes: 'It must be the case that surmises originate from our minds, even as the real world originates from Infinite Divine Reason. For when, as best it can, the human mind (which is a lofty likeness of God) partakes of the fruitfulness of the Creating Nature, it produces from itself, qua image of the Omnipotent Form, rational entities, [which are made] in the likeness of real entities'. ('*Coniecturas a mente nostra, uti realis mundus a divina infinita ratione, prodire oportet. Dum enim humana mens, alta dei similitudo, fecunditatem creatricis naturae, ut potest, participat, ex se ipsa, ut imagine omnipotentis formae, in realium similitudine rationalia exserit*'.) *De coniecturis* I.1, #5.1-5 (h III, 7). As well, in *DfD*, Cusa calls divine sonship (or *theosis*) 'a super-wonderful participation in divine power (*virtus divina*)'. *DfD*, #53.1-2 (h IV, 40).

⁷⁰ But also, to some degree, in his mid-career writings, e.g., *Idiota de mente*.

⁷¹ 'In activity or in making, the mind sees most certainly *posse* itself in the *posse* to make of the maker, in the *posse* to become of the makeable, and in the *posse* of the connection (*posse conexionis*) to both'. ('*In operatione seu factione certissime mens videt posse ipsum apparere in posse facere facientis et in posse fieri factibilis et in posse conexionis utriusque*'.) *DA*, XXVI, #10.1-3 (h XI, 135). See also *De venatione sapientiae* XXXIX, #115-117 (h XII, 107-109).

theological meaning out of raw sense perception and everyday human interaction. The remainder of the treatise, moreover, consists of a series of invitations to the reader(s) to construct theo-metaphysical conjectures about God's infinity and God's love on the basis of images or *similitudes*. Over the course of *DvD*'s meditative journey, regular things in the world—a tree, a clock, a mirror, a wall, a face—become imbued with tremendous theological significance. The Cusan contemplator's mind is raised to the infinite in and through its conjectural constructions, themselves made possible by the 'seminal power' of the indwelling Word. The text thus pictures by its form, and elicits in readerly experience, the unfolding within the self of the ability-to-create, and in creating, to be transformed, even divinized. Such unfolding is the 'facility of mystical theology' (*facilitas mysticae theologiae*) Cusa had promised to reveal (*pandere*) in the treatise,⁷² and it both mirrors and manifests absolute ability-to-make.

The *exercising of free will* is the third aspect of selfhood that becomes a site for the (contracted⁷³) reflection of infinite divine power and possibility in *DvD*. As Knut Alfsvåg has lucidly shown, for Nicholas of Cusa, '[T]he part of humans through which they are particularly closely related to the image of God is free will: through the appropriate exercise of free will one will thus grow in conformity to the divine foundation of one's own existence'.⁷⁴ In *DvD*, it is particularly the ability to freely choose

⁷² *DvD*, prolog, #1.4-5 (h VI, 3).

⁷³ Nicholas of Cusa 'never abandons the notion that God alone is Absolute (i.e., Uncontracted), whereas all other things are, necessarily contracted, or restricted, in various ways. Contracted being is finite being. God alone is Infinite. The universe and all its parts are finite, though in [*De docta ignorantia*] II, 1 (97) Nicholas refers to the universe as "privatively infinite": it is finite but is not bounded by any physical reality external to itself. Lacking these external limits it is "unlimited" and "infinite". Jasper Hopkins, 'Notes to *De venatione sapientiae*', in *Complete Philosophical and Theological Works of Nicholas of Cusa*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis, MN: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2001), pp. 1357-1381. at 1359.

⁷⁴ Alfsvåg., '*Explicatio and Complicatio*', 302.

to expand one's capability for receiving divine grace that reflects the infinite power of God:

O Lord, you have given me being of such kind that it can make itself ever more capable to receive your grace and goodness. And this power (*vis*), which I hold from you and in which I possess a living image of your omnipotent power (*virtus omnipotens*), is free will. By it I can increase or restrict my capacity for your grace.⁷⁵

One of the most commonly acknowledged themes of *DvD* is the reversal, both described and enacted in the text, whereby the human seeing of God becomes God's seeing of the human. In God's infinity is enfolded a coincidence of subject and object such that God's unlimited gaze turns out to be the deep meaning of the self's own act of gazing upon God.⁷⁶ In *DvD*'s prayerful reflections on free will, quoted just above, we find a similar dynamic: The self's power to choose God is itself an image of God's power. The exercising of free will (especially in relation to receptivity to divine grace) is, as Cusa says elsewhere, a kind of mimicking of the inimitable and uncontained: As the image of God, the mind 'has the power (*potentia*) to conform itself ever more and more, without limit, to its inaccessible exemplar. For in this respect the image, as best it can, imitates infinity'.⁷⁷ Moreover, because divine power/possibility is the deepest source and

⁷⁵ 'Dedisti mihi, domine, esse et id ipsum tale, quod se potest gratiae et bonitatis tuae continue magis capax reddere. Et haec vis, quam a te habeo, in qua virtutis omnipotentiae tuae vivam imaginem teneo, est libera voluntas, per quam possum aut ampliare aut restringere capacitatem gratiae tuae[.]' *DvD* IV, #11.1-5 (h VI, 15).

⁷⁶ Werner Beierwaltes, 'Visio facialis—Sehen ins Angesicht. Zur Coincidenz des endlichen und unendlichen Blicks bei Cusanus', *MFCG* 18 (1989), 91-124, 100.

⁷⁷ 'quae potentiam habet se semper plus et plus sine limitatione inaccessibili exemplari conformandi — in hoc enim infinitatem imaginis modo, quo potest, imitator...' Cusa continues, '[E]ven though our mind at the outset of its creation does not have the actual reflection of the creative Art in terms of trinity and oneness, nevertheless it does have the concreated power through which it can make itself, when stimulated, more conformed to the actuality of the Divine Art'. ('*Sic mens nostra, etsi in principio creationis non*

truth of human will and capability, the choice made for oneself is an integral aspect of the imitation of infinity:

O Lord, the Sweetness of every delight, you have placed within my freedom that I be my own if I am willing. Hence, unless I am my own, you are not mine, for you would constrain my freedom since you cannot be mine unless I also am mine.

And since you have placed this in my freedom, you do not constrain me, but you wait for me to choose to be my own.⁷⁸

In Cusa's *DvD*, human power-of-will and self-possession (on the one hand) and divine omnipotence (on the other) do not compete; rather, the former stands as a living image of the latter. Moreover, the contemplator's own intentionality, in taking up the text's invitation to gaze on the invisible, represents a kind of unfolding, laying out, expanding, or revealing (*pandere*) of the uncontracted divine power that grounds finite self-experience.

Developing, creating, and choosing are key aspects of what it means to be (and to become more and more) human. Nicholas of Cusa's *DvD* suggests that these are also primary ways in which humans, in and through the unfolding of *posse* within the self, reflect or image the absolute *posse* of God.

5. Posse and Relationality

habeat actualem resplendentiam artis creatricis in trinitate et unitate, habet tamen vim illam concreatam, per quam excitata se actualitati divinae artis conformiorem facere potest.) *Idiota de mente*, XIII, #149.20-21, 1-5 (h V, 106-07).

⁷⁸ *'O domine, suavitas omnis dulcedinis, posuisti in libertate mea, ut sim, si voluero, mei ipsius. Hinc nisi sim mei ipsius, tu non es meus. Necessitates enim libertatem, cum tu non possis esse meus, nisi et ego sim mei ipsius. Et quia hoc posuisti in libertate mea, non me necessitas, sed exspectas, ut ego eligam mei ipsius esse'.* *DvD VII*, # 25.15-19 (h VI, 27).

Thus far we have seen that, in Nicholas of Cusa's mystical theology as represented in *DvD*, the primary manifestation of divine *posse* in the created order consists in a certain life-dynamism or vital emerging—one which manifests with particular intensity in the human self. The mystical journey toward the vision of God involves seeking the infinite (and infinitely incomprehensible) power/possibility whence all things spring and perdure; concurrently, this path also involves seeking the deep truth of the human self as creature and as image of the divine *posse*, and discovering said truth in the self's own God-given capacities for progressively unfolding growth/development, creativity, and freedom.

Building on these premises (which I shall at this point assume have been sufficiently established), my suggestion now is that *relationality* is at the heart of the very self-transformational process which, in *DvD*, signifies the face of absolute *posse*. In other words, in Cusa's classic mystical treatise, the second-person phenomenon (viz., I-Thou encounter, in the Buberian sense) is fuel for the dynamic emergence-of-self—an emergence that both images and shares in the infinite *posse* of God.

Let us begin to unpack the argument for this claim by (re)considering the text's form. We have already noted *DvD*'s poetic performativity—its tendency to enact within the dance of its discourse, and to coax forth within its reader, an experience of the mystery to which it refers. Like many apophatic writers before and after him, Nicholas of Cusa operated under the assumption that 'the reader cannot understand what is being said unless she becomes it'.⁷⁹ Absolute *posse* is, as we have witnessed, a significant part of 'what is being said' in *DvD*. Cusa's mystical language in the treatise is intended, in part, to facilitate the reader's process of coming to understand God's power and possibility by

⁷⁹ Michael Anthony Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 9.

in some sense becoming toward, by participating in, infinite *posse*. But what is the shape of this discourse that means equally to describe and to mediate, ‘*experimentaliter*’, the divine potency of which it speaks?

Relationality is a crucial aspect of the text’s power to give rise to a transformative experience of its divine term. Probably the most obvious evidence of this is the text’s second-person form—it’s way of teaching via direct address to readers and to God, much in the manner of Augustine’s *Confessions*. The language of ‘I’ and ‘you’, which suffuses the text, has a kind of conjuring or evoking effect: It continually calls the implied reader-contemplator into a prayerful, relational mode of consciousness. The I-Thou relation, which is always being renewed *as* the reader encounters the text, *in time*, becomes a sort of ‘possibility space’ out of which creative conjectures spring and in which the contemplative self is guided freely to embrace its ‘best possible manner of existing’ with(in) the gaze of God.⁸⁰

As well, the paraliturgy around the all-seeing painting at the beginning of the treatise, which is designed to stage an experience of the possible-impossible infinity of God, is highly relational. Each monk is instructed to ‘ask the other [brother]’ whether he too experienced the gaze following him during the procession in opposite directions. When the question ‘you, too?’ is met with ‘yes’, the brother will ‘believe’ (*credet*) his comrade, *even though it does not seem possible*.⁸¹ In believing, he will discover that ‘the face looks unfailingly on all who walk before it even from opposite directions’.⁸² Thus, in and through the everyday interpersonal acts of walking together, gazing together,

⁸⁰ *DvD* IV, #9. 16-19 (h VI, 14).

⁸¹ ‘... *et audierit similiter opposito modo moveri, credet ei, et nisi crederet, non caperet hoc possibile*’.

DvD preface, #3.22-23 (h VI, 6).

⁸² *DvD* preface, #3.23-25 (h VI, 6).

speaking together, listening together, imagining together, and believing together, the monks enter what Cusa elsewhere calls the ‘cloud of impossibility’ where contraries coincide,⁸³ and where the human intellect is ushered ever closer to its highest degree of perfection.

Analysis of the text’s formal structure also reveals that points in the treatise whereat the notions of possibility or power are treated explicitly are also points at which loving relationality and dynamic self-becoming are highly salient and deeply interwoven. The most obvious example of this is in chapter fifteen. Here, the subsection containing the proclamation, ‘You... O God, who are infinity itself, are the one God, in whom I see that all power to be exists actually’⁸⁴ (a clear anticipation of Cusa’s notion of God as *possest*) is immediately followed upon by a subsection wherein the contemplator praises the God whose gaze continually follows him, mirroring the vicissitudes of his own face and bringing him into his ownmost being.⁸⁵ The close contiguity in the text of *possest* (on the one hand) and selving-in-relation (on the other hand) is not coincidental. For Cusa, the divine ‘Can-Is’ is disclosed most poignantly in the journey of the contemplator as he discovers his own true face within the gracious face of God: ‘O Lord God, who illumines

⁸³ *DvD IX, #36 (h VI, 34).*

⁸⁴ ‘*Tu igitur, deus, qui es ipsa infinitas, es ipse unus deus, in quo video omne posse esse esse actu*’. *DvD XV, #62.5-7 (h VI, 52).*

⁸⁵ ‘For as long as I see how, according to my changing, the gaze of your icon seems to be changed and your face seems to be changed because I am changed, you confront me as if you were a shadow which follows the changing of the one walking about. But since I am a living shadow and you are the truth, I conclude from the changing of the shadow that the truth is changed. Therefore, my God, you are shadow in such a way that you are truth. You are the image of me and everyone else in such a way that you are the exemplar’. (*Nam dum video, quomodo ad mutationem meam videtur visus eiconae tuae mutatus et facies tua videtur mutata, quia ego mutatus, occurris mihi quasi sis umbra, quae sequitur mutationem ambulantis; sed quia ego sum viva umbra et tu Veritas, iudico ex mutatione umbrae veritatem mutatam. Es igitur, deus meus, sic umbra, quod Veritas. Sic es imago mea et cuiuslibet, quod exemplar*’.) *DvD XV, #64.2-8 (h VI, 53).* The face-to-face gazing between the contemplator and God (as symbolized by the icon) embodies the coincidence or *conexio* between ability-to-form (*posse facere*) and ability-to-be-formed (*posse fieri*), which Cusa had mentioned just before this passage (*DvD XV, #61.16 (h VI, 52)*). (Cusa later juxtaposes *posse fieri* and *posse facere* in *DP, #27 and #29 (h XI, 32-33, 34-35)*.)

hearts, my face is a true face because you, who are truth, have given it to me'.⁸⁶ The very structure of chapter fifteen suggests that the second-personal event of face-to-face gazing and mirroring is the space in which God's possibilizing and actualizing of the self is most profoundly revealed in human experience.

The ideational content we have begun to unearth through these brief reflections on the text's form can be summed thusly: In Cusa's *DvD*, infinite *posse* manifests with special rarefaction in the relationally-mediated formation and transformation of the self of the contemplator. The mystery of all-seeing sight introduced via *similitudo* in the preface (and accessed through face-to-face encounter with the O/other) coincides with the absolute power, potency, or possibility by which the self is continually (re)created, and in which the self discovers and lives ever more fully into its own truth. As Cusa affirms elsewhere in the text, '*communicare est creari*', 'to communicate is to be created'.⁸⁷ Let us dig a bit more deeply into the contours of the coincidence in Cusa's thought between the I-Thou encounter and the unfolding/actualizing of infinite *posse* within human self-experience.

Firstly, the profound generativity of relationality is wrapped up in the doctrine of the *coincidentia oppositorum*. For Cusa, the collocation of contraries, the juxtaposition of distinct perspectives, reveals the mysterious creative ground in which the universe subsists.⁸⁸ This is precisely what makes intersubjectivity a fecund unfolding of God's creative power: The mutually opposed yet mutually coinciding encounter between

⁸⁶ '*Domine deus, illustrator cordium, facies mea vera est facies, quia tu eam mihi dedisti, qui es Veritas*' *DvD* XV, #64.8-9 (h VI, 53).

⁸⁷ Cusa, *DvD* XII, # 49.15 (h VI, 43).

⁸⁸ As Beierwaltes explains: For Cusa, God, as infinite 'contrariness of contrariety', is 'the grounding ground of every individual entity in its individuality and particularity (*in omnibus*), but also the ground of the coherence, the intrinsically relational unity, of the universe' [...] Beierwaltes, 'Mystische Elemente im Denken des Cusanus', trans. Charles Johnson, 436.

oneself and an other—an other with an irreducibly singular face and gaze—reveals, in a hidden way, God’s infinite face and gaze. ‘In every face, the face of faces is seen veiled and in enigma’.⁸⁹ Since God’s absolute visage/sight is the causal power of everything⁹⁰ (viz., God’s seeing is God’s creating and sustaining⁹¹), to encounter God’s gaze ‘in the face of [another] creature’ is also to tap into the wellspring or power source of ‘our ability to actualize [that for which] we are created’[.]⁹²

Secondly, the close connection in *DvD* between relationality and self-forming power can be seen in Cusa’s understanding of the meaning (and outcome) of human devotional acts directed toward God—that is to say, his theology of praise and/or prayer. To ‘turn toward’ or ‘answer to’ the divine gaze—in other words, to engage prayerfully the mystery beyond all objectification and rational thought (quite the paradoxical act, to be sure)—is to appropriate toward salutary ends the very free will which, as we earlier observed, is for Cusa an image of absolute *posse* in the human soul. In this vein, Walter Haug, commenting on *DvD* IV.11,⁹³ describes the actualization of the human capacity for

⁸⁹ ‘*In omnibus faciebus videtur facies facierum velate et in aenigmate*’. *DvD* VI, #21.1-2 (h VI, 22).

⁹⁰ ‘Feed me with your gaze, O Lord, and teach me how your gaze sees every sight that sees, everything that can be seen and every act of seeing and also every power of seeing, every power of being seen and every actual seeing that results from them both. Since your seeing is your causing, you who cause everything see everything’. (*Pasce me visu tuo, domine, et doce, quomodo visus tuus videt omnem visum videntem et omne visibile et omnem actum visionis et omnem virtutem videntem et omnem virtutem visibilem et omne ex ipsis exurgens videre, quia videre tuum est causare; omnia vides, qui omnia causas*’.) *DvD* VIII, #29.1-5 (h VI, 29).

⁹¹ ‘You are visible by all creatures and you see all. In that you see all you are seen by all. For otherwise creatures cannot exist since they exist by your vision. If they did not see you who see, they would not receive being from you. The being of a creature is equally your seeing and being seen’. (*Ab omnibus creaturis es visibilis et omnes vides; in | eo enim, quod omnes, vides, videris ab omnibus. Aliter enim esse non possunt creaturae, quia visione tua sunt; quod si te non viderent videntem, a te. non caperent esse. Esse creaturae est videre tuum pariter et videri.*) *DvD* X, #40.8-12 (h VI, 36).

⁹² Hoff, *The Analogical Turn*, 206.

⁹³ ‘O Lord, you have given me being of such a kind that it can make itself ever more capable to receive your grace and goodness. And this power, which I hold from you and in which I possess a living image of your almighty power, is free will. By it I can increase or restrict my capacity for your grace. I am able to increase it through conformity, when I strive to be good because you are good, to be just because you are just, and to be merciful because you are merciful, when all my striving is turned only toward you because all yours is turned toward me, when I give all my attention only to you and never remove my mind’s eyes

imaging God that emerges as the human freely chooses to be receptive toward, and to answer to, God's attentiveness (*Zuwendung*):

[The human] can accept [God's] attentiveness or not, so that becoming similar lies in [the human's] own free will. The human does not thereby have the option of withdrawing... from the sight or love of God, but [s/]he has the freedom not to gaze back, not to love in return. Thus Cusanus, by understanding every human act toward God as an answering grasp of divine attentive care, creates for himself a positive maneuvering room and with it the basis for an ethic: since God is the Good, the Mercy, the Righteousness, I can—by answering to his goodness, mercy, and righteousness—become good, merciful, righteous in my own right.⁹⁴

The human act of turning toward God's loving gaze in praise and prayer⁹⁵ is, in *DvD*, equivalent to the self's becoming in freedom toward the realization of the self's ownmost capacity/potential for living from, with, and in the divine life. The fruit of such deiform selving—what Bernard McGinn calls 'an operative identity that fuses our infinite

because you hold me in your constant vision, and when I direct my love to you alone because you, who are love, are turned toward me alone. And what, Lord, is my life, except that embrace in which the sweetness of your love so lovingly holds me! I love my life supremely because you are my life's sweetness'. (*Dedisti mihi, domine, esse et id ipsum tale, quod se potest gratiae et bonitatis tuae continue magis capax reddere. Et haec vis, quam a te habeo, in qua virtutis omnipotentiae tuae vivam imaginem teneo, est libera voluntas, per quam possum aut ampliare aut restringere capacitatem gratiae tuae; ampliare quidem per conformitatem, quando nitor esse bonus, quia tu bonus, quando nitor esse iustus, quia tu iustus, quando nitor esse misericors, quia tu misericors, quando non nisi omnis conatus meus est ad te conversus, quia omnis conatus tuus est ad me conversus, quando solum ad te attentissime respicio et numquam oculos mentis avertio, quia tu me continua visione amplecteris, quando amorem meum ad te solum converto, quia tu, qui caritas es, ad me solum es conversus. Et quid est, domine, vita mea nisi amplexus ille, quo tua dulcedo dilectionis me adeo amorose amplectitur? Diligo supreme vitam meam, quia tu es dulcedo vitae meae*.) *DvD*, IV, # 11. 1-15 (h VI, 15-16).

⁹⁴ 'Der Mensch hat dabei zwar nicht die Möglichkeit, sich dem Blick oder der Liebe Gottes zu entziehen, aber er hat die Freiheit, nicht zurückzublicken bzw. nicht wieder zu lieben.... Indem Cusanus also alle menschlichen Akte, auf Gott hin als ein antwortendes Aufnehmen der göttlichen Zuwendung versteht, schafft er sich einen positiven Spielraum für die similitudo und damit die Basis für eine Ethik: da Gott auch das Gute, die Barmherzigkeit, die Gerechtigkeit ist, kann ich, auf seine Güte, Barmherzigkeit, Gerechtigkeit antwortend, meinerseits gut, barmherzig gerecht werden' [.] Haug, 'Die Mauer des Paradieses', trans. Charles Johnson, 223.

⁹⁵ An act which, as this gaze is beyond objectification and representation, is, in a profound sense, impossible.

desire with God's Absolute Infinity'⁹⁶—is the emergence of ethical existence, a bodying forth in the world of divine goodness, justice, and mercy. *DvD* is a kind of score, the music of which, when played, constitutes a performance of this relationally imbued choosing, this becoming virtuous with(in) the received and reciprocated gaze of the O/other. Such choosing and becoming is also, for Cusa, an unfolding in finite creation of God's infinite power and possibility.

Thirdly, Cusa's reflections on the Trinity in *DvD* demonstrate the connection between *posse* and relationality. In chapter seventeen, Cusa speaks of the triune God as 'the power to love infinitely (*posse in infinitum amare*) and the power to be loved infinitely (*posse in infinitum amari*)', whence arises 'an infinite bond of love (*amoris nexus infinitus*) between the infinite lover and the infinite lovable'.⁹⁷ By weaving the notion of *posse* into the well-known Augustinian model of the Trinity as love, lover, and bond of love,⁹⁸ Cusa both draws on the Christian theological tradition and begins to carry it into new domains. Eventually, he would come to understand the Trinity along the lines of *possest*, where Spirit is the eternal, loving, life-generative union of what can be (the Father), and what comes to be (the Son).⁹⁹ But the sense of the Trinity as the actualized possibility of absolute love—as infinite 'vitally reciprocal relations' whence, in which,

⁹⁶ McGinn, 'Seeing and Not Seeing', 43.

⁹⁷ *DvD* XVII, #71.8-10 (h VI, 58).

⁹⁸ Closer to Cusa's own time, Raymond Lull (c. 1232 – c. 1315) had also developed a theology of the Trinity as love, lover, and bond of love.

⁹⁹ In *De possest*, *posse* and *amare* are still deeply entwined in Cusa's theology of the Trinity, but the latter is more specifically tied to the Spirit: '... the person of Absolute Possibility itself,... we call the omnipotent Father; the person of Existence itself, whom because He is of Possibility itself, we call the Son of the Father; [and] the person who is the union of both and whom we call the Spirit, since natural love is the spiritual union of the Father and the Son' [...] ('... *esse personam ipsius absoluti posse, quam nominamus patrem omnipotentem, et aliam ipsius esse, quam quia est ipsius posse nominamus filium patris, et aliam utriusque nexum, quam spiritum vocamus, cum naturalis amor sit nexus spiritualis patris et filii*'[.] DP, #48.12-16 (h XI, 59).

and to which creation ongoingly unfolds¹⁰⁰ —is, without question, already present in *DvD*.

Finally, the intricate interweaving of power/possibility, self-transformation, and second-person relationality becomes especially evident at the end of the treatise, wherein we find what appears to be a subtle (re)interpretation of the preface's opening paraliturgical exercise along trinitarian and pneumatological lines. In the very last chapter of *DvD*, Cusa likens the world to a self-portrait of the infinite divine artist—a painter who makes many images because the likeness of this painter's infinite power (*virtus*) can be unfolded more perfectly only in many figures, and all intellectual spirits are serviceable to each spirit. Moreover if they were not innumerable, you, O infinite God, could not be known in the best possible way. For each intellectual spirit sees in you, my God, something which must be revealed to the others if they would attain to you, their God, in the best possible way. The spirits, full of love, therefore reveal their secrets to one another, and thereby the knowledge of the beloved is increased as well as the desire for the beloved, and the sweetness of joy grows ardent.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ 'For the oneness which is predicated of God is not a mathematical oneness but is a true and living oneness which enfolds all things. And the trinity [which is predicated of God] is not a mathematical trinity but a trinity of vitally reciprocal relations. For life, without which there is no eternal joy and no supreme perfection, is triune. Hence, it is of the essence of the most perfect Life that it be most perfectly triune, so that the Possibility-to live is so omnipotent that from itself it begets a Life of its own. From these [two] proceeds Eternal Joy, the Spirit of Love'. (*Non enim unitas quae de deo dicitur est mathematica, sed est vera et viva omnia complicans. Nec trinitas est mathematica, sed vivaciter correlativa. Unitrina enim vita est, sine qua non est laetitia sempiterna et perfectio suprema. Unde de essentia perfectissimae vitae est, quod sit perfectissime unitrina, ut posse vivere sit adeo omnipotens, quod de se sui ipsius generet vitam. A quibus procedit spiritus amoris et laetitia sempiterna*'.) *DP*, #50.4-11 (h XI, 61-62).

¹⁰¹ '*Multas autem figuras facit, quia virtutis suae infinitae similitudo non potest nisi in multis perfectiore modo explicari, Et sunt omnes intellectuales spiritus cuilibet spiritui opportuni. Nam nisi forent innumerabiles, non posses tu, deus infinitus, meliori modo cognosci. Quisque enim intellectualis spiritus videt in te deo meo aliquid, quod nisi aliis revelaretur, non attingerent te deum suum meliori quo fieri posset modo. Revelant sibi mutuo secreta sua amoris pleni spiritus et augetur ex hoc cognitio amati et desiderium ad ipsum et gaudii dulcedo inardescit*'. *DvD* XXV, #117.1-9 (h VI, 8).

Many spirits in service to one another constitutes the ‘way in which it is possible’ (*posse fieri*) for the divine image to be multiplied—for God, the ‘painter’, in God’s ‘infinite power’ (*virtus infinita*) to be reflected in the created order. In the simple, embodied act of face-to-face communion—of lovingly speaking forth one’s own secret experience, and of lovingly attuning to (and accepting as one’s own) the other’s secret experience—the ‘intellectual spirits’ knowledge of, desire for, and enjoyment of God continually grows. This is a trinitarian dynamic inasmuch as it embodies loving relationality out of which springs understanding, ardor, and delight, as well as true selfhood. In the light of this closing meditation, the opening exercise with the painted icon is now seen to represent the monks’ coming to indwell and live forth joyful ‘absolute life’ (*absolutam vitam*), which is for Cusa the coincidence of love’s possibility (the Father) and actuality (the Son). This coincidence-in-communion Cusa calls the ‘arising work’ (*operatio exurgens*) or ‘motion’ (*motus*) of Spirit in which the human potential for fullness of life—the possibility of deified, Christoform existence—is made ever more real.

In *DvD*, it is the phenomenon of the second-personal that arouses what, in his final work, Nicholas of Cusa calls ‘the *posse* of the mind to see beyond all comprehensible faculty and power’. This capability is the ‘supreme *posse*’ of personal existence, and is also where ‘*posse* itself manifests itself maximally’.¹⁰²

6. Conclusion

¹⁰² ‘*Et hoc posse videre mentis supra omnem comprehensibilem virtutem et potentiam est posse supremum mentis, in quo posse ipsum maxime se manifestat; et est interminatum citra posse ipsum*’. *DA*, #11.6-8 (h XII, 125).

The faces of *posse* in Nicholas of Cusa's *DvD* are the ever forming and transforming faces of the self in relation to the faces of others. In these faces, the divine Face—a symbol which coincides with God's absolute power and possibility—is seen 'veiled and in enigma'.¹⁰³

In closing, it is important to underscore the depth of this veiledness. For Cusa, the self-formative relational dynamism that is, in *DvD*, the primary finite locus of infinite *posse*'s manifestation is not something that can be grasped by the human mind. Rather, it is only through *docta ignorantia* (learned ignorance) that the mystery of God's *posse* may be known—may be, as Cusa puts it elsewhere, touched in a non-touching way (*attingitur inattingibile inattingibiliter*).¹⁰⁴ To become-in-the-face-of-the-O/other involves a transcendence of self/other, subject/object dichotomies. Such becoming also involves a personal subsistence within a perpetually unfolding life-flow, the emergence of which one is both radically responsible for and radically subject to. Such paradoxes of second-personally mediated self-formation, when contemplated, give rise to wonder (*admiratio*); and wonder, for Cusa, is the 'wind' which 'excites potency to actuality' within the living flame that is the human spirit.¹⁰⁵

At the same time, however, these awe-inducing coincidences are housed in a common everydayness, even a mundaneness. Indeed, that *posse* is both eminently incomprehensible *and* eminently recognizable is, according to Jasper Hopkins, one of the chief 'paradoxes of posse' in Cusa's thought.¹⁰⁶ For what is more ordinary than face-to-

¹⁰³ *DvD* VI, #21.1-2 (h VI, 22).

¹⁰⁴ *Idiota de sapientia* I, # 1. 2 (h 5, 9).

¹⁰⁵ 'Nam noster spiritus intellectualis virtutem ignis in se habet. Missus est a deo in terram non ad aliud, nisi ut ardeat et crescat in flammam. Tunc crescit, quando excitatur admiratione, quasi uti ventus insufflans in igne excitat potentiam ad actum'. *De quaerendo deum* III, #43.8-12 (h IV, 30).

¹⁰⁶ Hopkins, 'Cusanus und die sieben Paradoxa von posse', 78.

face encounter? The tree's growth? The child's development? What more familiar than the self's ongoing process of formation in and through the attuned exchanges that make up human social life? Yet Nicholas of Cusa sees in such everyday events and experiences the enfolding and unfolding of the infinite divine Spirit who is 'fully and actually the power of all powers and the perfection of the perfect', and who, 'by the warmth of divine love', ushers to actuality the potential possibility and power within the human spirit 'so that fruit is borne that is most acceptable to the Spirit'.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ *DvD XXV*, #115.1-6, 9-11 (h VI, 87).