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A Note on Cusanus' Theological Logic: the Principle of the Coincidence of Opposites vs the Law of Non-Contradiction

Handout

As it has been pointed out by Jasper Hopkins, "the doctrine of the coincidence of opposites as it appears in Nicholas of Cusa's treatises and dialogues has been studied extensively though not exhaustively". In particular the relation between the principle of the coincidence of opposites and the law of non-contradiction has not been sufficiently investigated. This means that despite the interest in Cusanus' ideas, (1) the logical aspects and presuppositions of his theological doctrines still remain vague; and (2) the link of Cusanus' logic with Aristotelian logic remains substantially unexplored. In this note I intend to take a first step towards rectifying this situation by clarifying the logical machinery Nicholas drew up in order to solve the theological problem of how we can talk about and describe God. As a consequence, in the first section of this note, I shall summarize the logical and ontological meaning of Aristotle's law of non-contradiction and shortly analyze the notion and types of opposition; in the second section I shall discuss Nicholas' principle of the coincidence of opposites; and finally in the conclusion I'll try to identify a possible paradox in Cusanus' approach.

As is well known, there are arguably three versions of the principle of non-contradiction in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, book Γ. The first version is logico-ontological and concerns things as they exist in the world. It runs as follows: "It is impossible for the same attribute to belong and not to belong at the same time to the same object and in the same respect" (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Γ 3). This is the most general and widespread version of the law of non-contradiction, as it is the basis of the remaining two. M.V. Wedin (*Phronesis*, 2004) formalizes it as $\neg\Diamond(\exists x)(Fx \wedge \neg Fx)$. The second version is epistemological, since it is a normative claim about what it is rational to believe. It runs as follows: "It is impossible to hold the same thing to be <so and so> and not to be <so and so>" (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Γ 3). The third version is semantic. It runs as follows: "Opposite assertions cannot be true at the same time" (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Γ 6). This is the most interesting for us, for the adjective 'opposite' appears in it.

For Aristotle, the status of the law of non-contradiction as a first, indemonstrable principle is obvious. What is less obvious is the connection between the law of non-contradiction with the law of excluded middle (a second indemonstrable principle), that Aristotle introduces in the seventh chapter of *Metaphysics* Γ: "Of any one thing, one attribute must be either asserted or denied." As a matter of fact, the law of the excluded middle is not equivalent to the law of non-contradiction,

since the former does logically imply the latter, but the latter does not imply the former. Moreover, the law of excluded middle seems to be what distinguishes the two main kinds of opposite attributes/predicates that Aristotle seems to admit in his discussion of opposition in the tenth chapter of the *Categories*. Whereas the law of non-contradiction applies to both contradictory (broadly speaking) and contrary attributes/predicates (neither contradictory nor contrary attributes may belong to the same object at the same time and in the same respect), the law of excluded middle holds for contradictory attributes only. Contradictory attributes (such as speaking and not-speaking) are mutually inconsistent (just as contrary attributes, such as black and white) and mutually exhaustive, while contraries are not necessarily exhaustive (there is a large range of colours in between black and white). As far as the truth and the false are concerned, this difference entails that one member of the pair of contradictory attributes must be truly and the other falsely predicated of the same thing, if it exists, while contrary opposites may be simultaneously falsely predicated, though not simultaneously truly predicated, of the same thing, if it exists.

At this point, in *Categories* ch. 10, Aristotle moves from the logic of the *phasis* (that is, the term which connotes a property and denotes a class – a sort of class logic) to the analysis of the proposition (or logic of the *kataphasis* – a sort of first-order logic), as he now identifies another, sharper kind of contradiction, that between "statements opposed to each other as affirmation and negation." Unlike contrariety, this type of contradiction is restricted to propositions, given that, properly speaking, terms are never related as properly contradictory. Moreover, in this case, and in this case only, it is always necessary for one of the opposites (the affirmation and negation) to be true and the other false, even if there is not a real thing that corresponds to the subject of the propositions. Given the pair of propositions 'Socrates is sick' and 'Socrates is well', whose predicates are immediate contrary, the propositions may both be false, "for if Socrates exists, one will be true and the other false, but if he does not exist, both will be false; for neither 'Socrates is sick' nor 'Socrates is well' will be true, if Socrates does not exist at all" (*Categories*, ch. 10 – Ackrill's translation). But if Socrates does not exist, the negations of both the preceding propositions ('Socrates is sick' and 'Socrates is well') will always be true: the negation 'Socrates is not sick' is true if Socrates is non-existent, "for if he does not exist, 'he is sick' is false but 'he is not sick' true" – and the same holds in the case of 'Socrates is not well'. On the contrary, opposition between terms cannot be contradictory, both because only propositions (of the form subject-predicate) can be true or false (*Categories*, ch. 10) and because any pair of opposite terms may fail to apply to a given subject.

Cusanus admits the validity of the law of non-contradiction in the case of creatures, but he denies it for God. God's reality lies beyond any familiar domain where the law of non-contradiction rules. Because of God infinity, the principle of the coincidence of opposites applies to Him; the law of non-contradiction does not. But is this really the case? As it has been noticed by Clyde Lee Miller (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, *sub voce*): "As so often in negative and apophatic theology, we are not only told what God is not but led to reflect explicitly on what God must be, even if we have no conceptual clarity about what we assert." The result is a second-order language about the ways in which we must think and talk about God. Hence, in order to answer the question, it is necessary to verify whether the principle of the coincidence of opposites respects the law of non-contradiction or not, but also whether the second-order language proper to Cusanus' theology respects the law of non-contradiction or not.

Let me start with some preliminary remarks. Nicholas' notion of opposition, so important for his theological logic, derives from the Aristotelian notion, even if his reading of Aristotle's theory of opposition is peculiar and closely connected to the first Aristotelian tentative formulation of the logic of the *phasis* in the *Topics*. In other words, Cusanus seems to ignore the development that Aristotelian logic had over time. He does not realize that the law of non-contradiction is a logico-ontological principle that rules over state of affairs and propositions rather then objects and properties. So he thinks in terms of class logic. The basic unit of meaning or content in his theological system is therefore the categorical term. Usually expressed grammatically as a noun or noun phrase, each categorical term connotes an attribute (or property), designates a class (or set) of things and cleaves the world into exactly two mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive sets: the class of those things to which the attribute connoted by the term belongs and the class of those things to which it does not belong. As a consequence, for every class designated by a categorical term, there is another class, its complement, that includes everything excluded from the original class, and this complementary class can be designated by its own categorical term, made up by the original term preceded by the negation. Thus, *cats* and *non-cats* are complementary (that is contradictory) classes. Such a logical structure excludes that an element belonging to a certain class may belong to its complement. If this was the case of God as *coincidentia oppositorum*, then Cusanus' system would be based on a negation of the law of non-contradiction, and he shold be consdered as an anti-Aristotelian logician.

In *De Docta Ignorantia* (I, 24; II, 3; and *Letter to Cardinal Julian*) Cusanus says both that God enfolds all things and that in God contradictories coincide. Ontologically prior to its creation the world was enfolded in God as an effect in its cause. According to Cusanus God is the Enfolding

of all things (*De Docta Ignorantia* I, 22), and in the Divine Enfolding *all things coincide* without any difference (*De Coniecturis* II, 1). Moreover his declaration that opposites *coincide* has to be construed as being the claim that opposites are somehow *identical*. In *De Docta Ignorantia* III, 1, he states that in the universe no thing coincides with another thing, that is, no two things are exactly identical. In *De Possest* 8 he claims that in God absolute possibility *coincides* with absolute actuality, for possibility and actuality are *identical* in God. If we focus on Nicholas' expressions, it is clear that the coincidence (or identity) at stake is not the identity of the subject of two contradictory proposition, but the identity of the attributes designated by their predicates – attributes that in God are God Himself. *That in God opposites coincide* is Nicholas's way of saying that God is altogether undifferentiated (Hopkins). This fact can be better understood if we think of Cusanus' assertion that God is *beyond* the coincidence of opposites (*De visione Dei*, 10 and 13; *De Possest*, 62). In Cusanus' view, no finite mind can comprehend God, since finite minds cannot conceive of what it is like for God to be altogether undifferentiated (*De Possest*, 74). In God opposites coincide, and, yet, God is beyond their coincidence. In Him there is no distinction between Being and not-being, between Oneness and not-oneness. What is more, according to Cusanus God is not *a* being, since all beings are finite and differentiated; nor does He have a plurality of attributes.

Indeed, when Cusanus utilizes contradictory expressions for describing God's Being, he always explains the way in which we have to understand them. And every time he explains why we can assert apparently contradictory propositions. Every time it is evident that (1) the sense of the words he employs is different from the common one, and (2) there is not a same point of view (or respect) from which we look at God and the creatures. For example, in *De Possest* 11 he writes: "It does not matter what name you give to God, provided that … *you mentally remove the limits with respect to its possible being*." The most comprehensive formulation of the law of non-contradiction runs: "It is impossible for the same attribute to belong and not to belong at the same time to the same object and in the same respect". In order to have a contradiction it is required that (1) the same property (2) must be attributed to the same thing, (3) at the same time, (4) in the same respect. If the second and third requirements are satisfied by Cusanus' conincidence of opposites, the first and the last one are not. Thus, paradoxically, the principle that in Cusanus' opinion should have been the counterpart of the law of non-contradiction *in divinis*, simply was not a negation of the latter but a sort of restatement.