



Antoni Śmist

## Nicholas Cusanus and the Problem of Ignorance. A Minor Polemic with the Interpretation of Étienne Gilson

### Introduction

Nicholas Cusanus (1401–1464) was a leading figure of the intellectual milieu of the Late Middle Ages, one who “towers above his century,” as Étienne Gilson puts it.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, Cusanus’s writings have compelled us to undertake various interpretative efforts in order to understand his intellectual legacy in light of the vital issues of this period, including its manifold tensions and conflicts.<sup>2</sup> In the periodization that is usually employed by historians of philosophy, Cusanus is placed at the end of the Middle Ages and might be easily seen as someone who closes this period by going against the declining medieval

---

Antoni Śmist, The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland  
anteksmist@gmail.com • ORCID: 0000-0002-9760-1835

<sup>1</sup> Étienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2019), 534.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. 2: *Late Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy* (New York–London–Toronto–Sydney–Auckland: Doubleday, 1993), 231–232.



scholasticism—one who is against the “schools,” “jargon,” “formalisms,” and especially against Aristotelianism. He is presented by Gilson in his comprehensive *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* in the following manner:

[...] the new notion of infinity entailed nothing less than a revolution. All the mediaeval philosophies and theologies had been swayed by the Aristotelian principle of contradiction. Anybody inviting Thomas Aquinas, Siger of Brabant, Duns Scotus, Ockham or Nicholas of Autrecourt to argue from this principle, or in conformity with it, was assured of a favorable answer. Nicholas of Cues sees in this universal agreement on the absolute validity of the principle of contradiction the common illusion, not of nominalism only, but of Aristotle and all his followers. In his *Apology for Learned Unknowing*, he expressly protests against the present predominance of the Aristotelian sect, which considers the coincidence of opposites a heresy, whereas its admission is the starting point of the ascension to mystical theology”. In short, the new doctrine demanded the rejection of the dialectics of Aristotle. In Nicholas’ own mind, there was nothing new about this demand. He was inviting his contemporaries to return to Hermes Trismegistos, Asclepius and Denis the Areopagite.<sup>3</sup>

Gilson concludes:

Yet, at the end of the fifteenth century, Aristotelianism itself was in turn reaching the term of its course. It was going in circles. Then Nicholas went back to Chartres. The critical edition of his *Learned Unknowing* abounds in references to Thierry of Chartres, to Gilbert of la Porree, to Clarenbaud of Arras, John of Salisbury and others whose inspiration was akin to his own doctrine. Nicholas went still farther back into the

---

<sup>3</sup> Gilson, *Christian Philosophy*, 536.

past, to the sources of these latter sources: Chalcidius, Macrobius, Asclepius, Hermes Trismegistus were names familiar to him, and since their Platonism agreed with the doctrine of Denis the Areopagite, Nicholas could not doubt that they were substantially right. At the end of an age which is commonly described as having been swayed by Aristotle, this cardinal of the Holy Roman Church calmly decided that the logic of Aristotle, inspired by the present condition of man, was no fitting instrument to investigate a universe created by the infinite God of Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

In the Polish translation of the book, based on its German version (*Christliche Philosophie* [Christian Philosophy], coauthored with Philotheus Böhner), the same ideas can generally be found, but with different themes emphasized. It seems that Cusanus appears to be much more prudent in the English version, and as clearly having the good of Christendom in mind; a reader of the Polish translation, however, might get a different impression.<sup>5</sup> The analysis in the Polish version is based on two treatises, *De docta ignorantia* [On Learned Ignorance] (1440) and *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* [Apology of Learned Ignorance] (1449), the latter being a response to John Wenck's critique of the former. Gilson claims that this *docta ignorantia* ("learned ignorance") has primarily three theoretical contexts which are strictly connected to each other: Socratic, mystical, and methodological. Socrates knew that he did not know anything, and Cusanus is interested in precisely this kind of ignorance. His search for God's vivid reality cannot meet its goal by use of the knowledge afforded by scholastic philosophy; it can only be accomplished with

---

<sup>4</sup> Gilson, *Christian Philosophy*, 540.

<sup>5</sup> These two versions differ both in form and content, sharing the same basic ideas but in some cases (and Cusanus is definitely one of them) there is a shift in evaluation and a slightly different approach taken.

an awareness of the ignorance that leads us through negative theology into mystical darkness. Our knowledge is limited, and our notions are dull, therefore the only way available for us is to wade stumble blindly towards God who, nonetheless, would still be “getting lost in the infinite darkness.”<sup>6</sup>

Depicted in this manner, Cusanus might be seen as the destroyer of the medieval “architecture” of knowledge whose conceptual sophistication might have seemed to him as already ossified and far from personal religious fervor, as leading us only to the “confusion of tongues” due to the lack of a direct approach to the vivid reality of God. I do not claim that Gilson necessarily wants to say all this, nonetheless this image might be easily evoked in the reader’s mind, given the emphasis on mystical “darkness,” being “blindfolded,” etc. This pertains for the most part to the Polish version; however, in the English one, we also find a strong anti-Aristotelian (or antilogical) trait: “The remedy to the harm done by Aristotle’s *Organon* could not be found in the *Organon*. Every attempt to find it there had simply resulted in the creation of one more Aristotelian sect eager to join in the fight carried among themselves by the existing Aristotelian schools. If there was a way out of Babel, Plotinus alone could provide it.”<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, in the conclusion placed directly after the chapter on Cusanus (in the Polish version), Gilson tries to vindicate “the old” Middle Ages, stressing that the declining period does not burden the entire medieval philosophy with its decadent tendencies (e.g., an antilogical trait). He also positively assesses school affiliations as a cultural phenomenon which, in his opinion, helped to preserve the love of truth. As he concludes, it saved Christian philosophy from the kind of

---

<sup>6</sup> Böhner and Gilson, *Historia filozofii chrześcijańskiej. Od Justyna do Mikołaja Kuzańczyka* [History of Christian Philosophy. From Justin to Nicholas Cusanus], transl. by S. Stomma (Warszawa: IW PAX, 1962), 606–608.

<sup>7</sup> Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy*, 535. See quotations above as well.

radicalism that thinks it is better to destroy everything first and then build something completely new on these ruins.<sup>8</sup>

This particular arrangement of content might suggest that Cusanus is a radical, throwing knowledge away in exchange for ignorance, scholastic tradition for the sake of novelties, and—as a consequence—giving up the light of Truth in return for a dim-witted descent into mystical darkness. This image might be evoked in particular, since Cusanus is perceived in this very way by his aforementioned contemporary, John Wenck, who sees in the concept of *docta ignorantia* a rejection of the entire logically sound discourse in theology and philosophy. Wenck has no doubt: Cusanus's sole purpose is to elevate himself, to lead his disciples astray by taking a path of foolishness and by ensnaring them in his heretical ignorance (“For the teachings of the Waldensians, Eckhartians, and Wycliffians have long shown from what spirit this learned ignorance proceeds”).<sup>9</sup>

However, Gilson does not perceive Cusanus as such. For Gilson, he is neither a radical, nor an intellectual apostate, but rather a figure who is much more complex and almost tragic. In this view, Cusanus harbours a sincere desire to preserve the unity of the Church in the face of escalating and threatening philosophical and theological differences. A dogmatic attitude and academic pretensions to having full and exclusive knowledge of God can only lead to “endless disputes, followed by doctrinal condemnations, heresies and schisms.”<sup>10</sup> Cusanus's message is supposed to be a voice of resistance to this intellectual frag-

---

<sup>8</sup> Böhner and Gilson, *Historia filozofii chrześcijańskiej* [History of Christian Philosophy], 618.

<sup>9</sup> John Wenck, *On Unknown Learning*, 21, 33, transl. by J. Hopkins, in Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Debate with John Wenck. A Translation and an Appraisal of De Ignota Litteratura and Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1988), 426, 439.

<sup>10</sup> Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 113.

mentation of the Church, rather than an attempt to cause another split. In Gilson's interpretation, Cusanus's proposal is that we should "rid ourselves of that truth obsession" by acknowledging that our claims remain in some relation to the Truth, however not having the truth value in the full sense of the word "truth." A philosopher's goal is to gain awareness of the nature of knowledge, and it is essentially a negative goal.<sup>11</sup> In this view, Cusanus tries to show that the world is ultimately unknowable, as it is ontologically dependent on an unknowable God, and only in this manner should it reveal God's unknowable nature.<sup>12</sup>

Gilson draws a dismal conclusion: "Such was the last word of mediaeval philosophy."<sup>13</sup> Although he acknowledges positive elements of Cusanus's thought, he nonetheless states that it is a rejection of a reason-based philosophy. This should be regarded as its true meaning as presented against the broad horizon of the history of European philosophy.<sup>14</sup>

Gilson, therefore, reduces the meaning of Cusanus's philosophical message to the problem of knowledge of truth, i.e., to the meaning of *docta ignorantia*. Indeed, it is the center of Cusanus's investigations. He starts with it in his first philosophical treatise—*De docta ignorantia* [On Learned Ignorance]—and it is the main theoretical context of all his successive works. However, it is not a clear-cut concept, and its meaning requires some interpretative effort. The difficulty arises

---

<sup>11</sup> Gilson, *Unity*, 114: "Basically, philosophy is but a *docta ignorantia*: a learned ignorance, and the more we learn about our own ignorance, the more we learn also about philosophy."

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* Cf.: "[...] mediaeval philosophy broke down when, having mistaken philosophy for reality itself, the best minds were surprised to find reason empty and began to despise it." Gilson, *Unity*, 91.

already when we try to translate it into other languages. The Polish translation of the term is “oświecona niewiedza” (“illuminated ignorance”), which suggests that it is not scientific knowledge that Cusanus has in mind, regardless of the fact that he keeps employing the participle “docta.” The translator, Ireneusz Kania, explains this modification by referring to the German translation (“belehrte,” not “gelehrte,” as he points out) and by identifying “suprarational” with “nonrational.” In this view, the ignorance offered by Cusanus would be of an utterly non-scientific nature.<sup>15</sup>

The aim of this paper is to show that the concept of learned—not illuminated, nor enlightened—ignorance is all about science and learnedness and only this mode of translation is correct. The problem lies not in the translation itself, which is not the target of my critique, but in the quite prevalent and widespread image of Cusanus’s thought as suggested by Gilson and which can be seen behind Kania’s decision. The paper is not a critique of Gilson’s entire account, which contains a good deal of important remarks and just assessments. Here, I deliberately emphasize only those that may obscure the true meaning of Cusanus’s philosophy. I do so because I want to show that the image of Cusanus as the destroyer of medieval philosophy and the originator of irrational philosophy is unambiguously opposed to his real intentions. In this paper, I do not seek to analyze Cusanus’s role in the entirety of the history of philosophy, but to determine the correct meaning of his “learned ignorance,” the meaning of which can serve as the basis for drawing further historical-philosophical conclusions. Therefore, I bring forward what Cusanus himself considers to be “knowledge” and how he perceives its internal structure, before connecting it with his understanding of its social dimension.

---

<sup>15</sup> Mikołaj z Kuzy, *O oświeconej niewiedzy* [On Illuminated Ignorance], transl. by I. Kania (Warszawa: Aletheia, 2014), 11, footnote 1.

## The Structure of Knowledge

Cusanus's first philosophical treatise, *De docta ignorantia* [On Learned Ignorance], begins with a paradoxical statement: "knowing is not-knowing" (*scire est ignorare*).<sup>16</sup> The starting point of Cusanus's reasoning that should lead to an explanation of this paradox is the possibly surprising acknowledgment of the adequacy and expediency of the cognitive processes of all living organisms.<sup>17</sup> They do not "stumble blindly" but properly recognize what is suitable and necessary for their survival.<sup>18</sup>

Nor do human beings stumble blindly. All senses and faculties (i.e., reason and intellect) have some proper object, suitable for a particular faculty to recognize, unless it is prevented in a particular moment by an accident (e.g., some illness). Nevertheless, human cognitive processes are essentially correct and allow us to know things that are unclear or hidden, i.e., to know such truths that require chains of reasoning in order to be revealed. In this case, we can trust our reasonings insofar as we admit the general correctness of mental and sensory operations. And "that from which no sound mind can withhold assent is, we have no doubt, most true (*verissimum*)."<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> *De docta ignorantia* [On Learned Ignorance] (h I), I, I, 2. Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, I, I, 2, transl. by J. Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1981), 4. In this paper, I quote all Cusanus's Latin sources accordingly to this edition: Nicolai de Cusa, *Opera omnia iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita* (Felix Meiner: Lipsia–Hamburgus, 1932), available on <http://www.cusanus-portal.de/> without critical apparatus. Quoted for the first time, the title is followed by a bracket containing the volume number and, if necessary, the number of a fascicle.

<sup>17</sup> Nicholas, *Ignorance*, I, I, 2, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Compendium* (h XI/3), VI, 16.

<sup>19</sup> *Ignorantia*, I, I, 2. Nicholas, *Ignorance*, I, I, 2, 5.



The cognitive process is based on desire, from which all particular cognitive activities, from the senses to intellect, are “strung.” Desire (*appetitus, desiderium*) supplies cognitive processes with teleology and ties the mind with a desired object, so the increase of knowledge happens through “affectionate embrace (*amorosus amplexus*).”<sup>20</sup> Following tradition, we can discern that the human mind comprehends two faculties in this way: reason (*ratio, δίανοια*) and intellect (*intellectus, νοῦς*). The former is responsible for logical operations, discerning relations between objects and forming concepts, whereas the latter is a faculty of intuitive insight. Both faculties are required for knowing the truth about this world, but they serve different purposes. Reason grasps “comparative relation” (*comparativa proportio*), while intellect is able to grasp nondiscursive principles, upon which this relation is built.<sup>21</sup> We can grasp comparative relation because of the number, since, as Pythagoras, quoted by Cusanus, claims, “everything is constituted and understood (*constitui et intelligi*)” through numbers.<sup>22</sup> Still, relations between things are so “precise” that they elude human reason and, says Aristotle, “in things most obvious by nature such difficulty occurs for us as for a night owl which is trying to look at the sun.”<sup>23</sup> For this reason, we find nothing more perfect in science than in ignorance, which is something “most learned (*doctissimum*).”<sup>24</sup>

This is what we can find at the very beginning of the treatise. It might be striking that the whole chapter is essentially a repetition of some threads from the first book of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. These

---

<sup>20</sup> *Ignorantia*, I, I, 2. Nicholas, *Ignorance*, I, I, 2, 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ignorantia*, I, I, 2–3. Cf. Richard Parry, “Episteme and Techne,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021 Edition), ed. E.N. Zalta, accessed March 19, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/episteme-techne/>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ignorantia*, I, I, 3. Nicholas, *Ignorance*, I, I, 3, 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ignorantia*, I, I, 4. Nicholas, *Ignorance*, I, I, 4, 6.

<sup>24</sup> *Ignorantia*, I, I, 4. Nicholas, *Ignorance*, I, I, 4, 6.

threads are even presented in the same order, so we very easily get the impression that Cusanus has *Metaphysics* in front of him when writing the first chapter of his treatise. Aristotle claims that human nature has a desire for knowledge and evidence of this is, for example, human appreciation of the senses. He analyzes the differences between living organisms in order to establish what human knowledge and wisdom consist of, as opposed to sensory perception and experience, common to all living organisms. We read that animals live by appearances, memory and—to a lesser degree—experience, which is, for humans, a source of scientific knowledge and practical skills. Wisdom, on the other hand, is universal knowledge of all things, especially those that are difficult to know (while sense perception is easy), and it pertains to causes and principles. Principles are the most knowable things because we know other things through principles. Aristotle also supplies us with a doxographic overview of other philosophers, emphasizing the statements of the Pythagoreans and Plato, who considered numbers to be the principle of existing things.<sup>25</sup>

Knowledge of truth—we read further on—is both easy and difficult at the same time to achieve, because no philosopher can be utterly mistaken, nor can he grasp the truth in its fullness. Although we cannot achieve great results as individuals, we can achieve such results as a community of thinkers. The difficulty of the knowledge of truth lies in ourselves, “For as the eyes of bats are to the light of day so is the understanding (*intellectus*, νοῦς) in our souls to the things that are by nature most evident of all.”<sup>26</sup> Further on, Aristotle explains why an infinite chain of causes is impossible and he stipulates the necessity of the exis-

---

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, 1–10, 980a–993a, transl. by C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2016), 2–26.

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, II, 1, 993b, 27. Arystoteles, *Metafizyka* [Metaphysics], II, 1, 993b, T. I, transl. by T. Źeleźnik, ed. M. A. Krąpiec, A. Maryniarczyk (Lublin: RW KUL, 1996), 84–85.

tence of the first cause. Leaving aside metaphysical arguments, what is important for this paper is an epistemological argument: if there were an infinite chain of causes, knowledge would be impossible, because knowledge, properly understood, is the knowledge of causes and we are not able to mentally grasp an infinite chain of causes.<sup>27</sup>

The last issue is fundamental for Aristotle's theory of knowledge. According to *Posterior Analytics*, scientific knowledge is the recognition of a necessary cause of the existence of something, and we gain knowledge of causes by means of syllogistic reasoning. If we want a syllogism to have a value of proof, we need to base it on premises that are "true,"<sup>28</sup> "primary,"<sup>29</sup> "immediate,"<sup>30</sup> "better known than, prior to, and causative of the conclusion."<sup>31</sup> A scholar must believe in these principles more than in the conclusions derived from the principles; for him, nothing should be more certain, nor known better.<sup>32</sup>

It is not altogether clear what Aristotle himself considers to be the first in the structure of knowledge. In *Metaphysics*, he points towards the principles of syllogistic reasoning (the law of non-contradiction

---

<sup>27</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, II, 2, 994a–994b, 28–30.

<sup>28</sup> Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, I, 2, 71b, in Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics. Topica*, transl. by H. Tredennick, E.S. Forster (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 28–29.

<sup>29</sup> Aristotle, *Analytics*, 31: "They must be primary and indemonstrable, because otherwise we shall not know them unless we have proof of them; for to know (otherwise than accidentally) that which is capable of proof implies that one has proof of it."

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 72a, 33: "[...] an immediate premiss is one which has no other premiss prior to it."

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 71b, 31: "They must be causative, better known and prior: causative, because we only have knowledge of a thing when we know its cause; prior, inasmuch as they are causative; and already known, not merely in the one sense that their meaning is understood, but also in the sense that they are known as facts."

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 72b, 35–37. Then, Aristotle opposes two views: "(1) that scientific knowledge is impossible, (2) that all truths are demonstrable by circular proof." Aristotle, *Analytics*, I, 3, 37.

and the law of excluded-middle),<sup>33</sup> but in *Posterior Analytics*, he gives mathematical definitions as an example.<sup>34</sup> In the medieval tradition, the problem of “what is the first” in the structure of knowledge had been undertaken and interpreted in various ways; in some cases, “the first” in knowledge is identified with the so-called “first concepts” of the human mind, and in other cases—with transcendentals, or even God Himself.<sup>35</sup>

Cusanus’s concept of learned ignorance is an effort to establish a theological meaning of this unprovable, intellectual foundation of knowledge, based on the aforementioned principal elements of the theory of knowledge from Book Alpha of *Metaphysics* and Chapter One of *De docta ignorantia* [On Learned Ignorance]:

1. Knowledge is based on desire.
2. The highest form of knowledge is wisdom:
  - 2.1. Wisdom is difficult,
  - 2.2. Wisdom is knowledge of causes and principles,
    - 2.2.1. The principles are the best known (the most knowable elements of the knowledge structure).
3. Insight of truth is easy and difficult at the same time:

---

<sup>33</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IV, 3 ff., 1005a ff, 52 ff. Giovanni Reale, *Storia della filosofia antica* [History of Ancient Philosophy], Vol. II: *Platone e Aristotele* [Plato and Aristotle] (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1988), 561–566.

<sup>34</sup> Aristotle, *Analytics*, I, 10, 76b, 71.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Owen Goldin, “Two Traditions in the Ancient Posterior Analytics Commentaries,” in *Interpreting Aristotle’s Posterior Analytics in Late Antiquity and Beyond*, ed. F.A.J. De Haas, M. Leunissen, M. Martijn (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 155–182. Jan A. Aertsen, “What is First and Most Fundamental?—The Beginnings of Transcendental Philosophy,” *Miscellanea Mediaevalia* 26 (1998), 177–192. A comprehensive work on the issue of transcendentals in mediaeval philosophy: Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought. From Philip the Chancellor (ca. 1225) to Francisco Suárez* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

- 3.1. We cannot completely err in all respects,
  - 3.2. We cannot achieve truth in its entirety,
  - 3.3. Valuable results of knowledge are achieved by community, not by individuals,
  - 3.4. Human intellect is not accustomed to knowing the first principles.
4. There is something in the knowledge structure that is first and unprovable which prevents the infinite regress from occurring.

As I try to demonstrate below, Cusanus accepts this structure, but he bestows a new meaning upon it. He claims that the first place in the structure of knowledge is occupied by an infinite God, because only in this manner the infinite regress is to be avoided. Such a structure, based on prop. 1 and supplemented by prop. 4, allows Cusanus to explain—but not to erase—a paradox that lies within prop. 2 and 3. There is no rejection of Aristotle's theory of knowledge but an attempt to ground it in theology and by the same token to bring scientific knowledge into agreement with the Christian doctrine. Cusanus demonstrates that human beings have a desire for knowledge and truth (prop. 1), which also applies to the first principle (prop. 4), and the first principle is both the most knowable thing in the structure of knowledge and the most difficult to know (prop. 2–3); nonetheless, all human cognition is based upon this principle (prop. 4). Cusanus identifies the first principle with God and this identification is also endowed with the social dimension that is important for Gilson and Aristotle (prop. 3.3).

### **God as the Principle of Knowledge and Science**

The idea that God is the principle of knowledge (He is the first in the structure of knowledge) is expressed in many places both explicitly and implicitly. For example, in *De docta ignorantia* [On Learned

Ignorance], Cusanus states that “Jesus is the one in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden” (*omnes thesauri sapientiae et scientiarum*);<sup>36</sup> in *De venatione sapientiae* [On the Hunt for Wisdom], he calls God “the Delimitation” of all things and all sciences (*terminus omnium rerum et omnium scientiarum*);<sup>37</sup> in *De non aliud* [On the Not-Other], he quotes Dionysius the Areopagite claiming that all limits of all sciences pre-exist in God (*termini omnes omnium scientiarum*).<sup>38</sup> In this work, he explicitly states that if we want to avoid infinite regress, we have to achieve infinity in a nondiscursive way.<sup>39</sup> In other writings, he also claims that God is the most knowable thing and—due to His sublime knowability—He cannot be known (conf. prop. 2.2.1 and 3.4).<sup>40</sup> Moreover, despite His unknowability to the particular human mind, He is the object of faith for the whole humanity and for all peoples (conf. prop. 3.1–3.4).<sup>41</sup>

Not wanting to multiply examples beyond necessity, I would like to highlight one passage from *De coniecturis* [On Surmises], in which the strategy employed by Cusanus is laid out in a clear-cut and simple manner:

Every searching and investigating mind inquires only in the light of Absolute Oneness. And there can be no question which does not presuppose Absolute Oneness. Doesn't the question whether some thing

---

<sup>36</sup> Nicholas, *Ignorance*, III, 11, 245, 141. *Ignorantia*, III, XI, 245.

<sup>37</sup> *De venatione sapientiae* (h XII), XXVII, 80. Nicholas, *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*, XXVII, 80, transl. by J. Hopkins, in Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa: Metaphysical Speculations. Six Latin Texts Translated Into English* (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1998), 1329.

<sup>38</sup> *De non aliud* (h XIII), XIV, 59.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, X, 40.

<sup>40</sup> *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* (h II), 16.

<sup>41</sup> Nicholas, *Ignorance*, I, II, 5–8, 6–7; I, VII, 18, 12–13. Idem, *The Layman on Mind*, I, 51, transl. by J. Hopkins, in Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge* (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1996), 533.

exists presuppose being, the question what a thing is presuppose quiddity, the question why it is presuppose cause, and the question for what purpose it is presuppose a goal? Therefore, that which is presupposed in every doubting must, necessarily, be most certain. Therefore, because Absolute Oneness is the Being of all beings, the Quiddity of all quiddities, the Cause of all causes, the Goal of all goals, it cannot be called into doubt. But subsequent to Absolute Oneness there is a plurality of doubts.<sup>42</sup>

God is then to be sought as being prior to any question and any answer, i.e., prior to any kind of discourse, because He is a condition, or The Condition, of knowledge and discourse. Therefore, philosophers must search for truth within the conditions of knowledge. This truth, however, is incomprehensible, but it is not altogether hidden, since it is always presupposed. Although God is incomprehensible, emphasized by Cusanus by means of the imaginative metaphor of darkness, there is also a persistence in writing about the simplicity, or even obviousness, of the knowledge of God in Cusanus's treatises. It is not a coincidence that in the cited passage we read about an inquiry "in the light of" God (*in eius lumine*), and that at the beginning of *Idiota de sapientia* [The Layman on Wisdom], Cusanus recalls two passages from the Bible (Proverbs 1:20 and Ecclesiasticus 24:7): "wisdom proclaims [itself] openly in the streets; and its proclamation is that it dwells in the highest places (*in altissimis*)."<sup>43</sup> Cusanus employs a metaphor of light and brightness just as often as the one of darkness, and it is not a coinci-

---

<sup>42</sup> Nicholas, *On Surmises*, I, 5, 19, transl. by J. Hopkins, in Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa: Metaphysical Speculations: Volume Two* (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2000), 171.

<sup>43</sup> Nicholas, *The Layman on Wisdom*, I, 3–4, transl. by J. Hopkins, in Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge* (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1996), 497–498. *Idiota de sapientia* (h V), I, 3–4.

dence either.<sup>44</sup> He explicitly writes about simplicity with regard to such names of God as *posse ipsum*,<sup>45</sup> *non aliud*,<sup>46</sup> *exemplar absolutum*,<sup>47</sup> *maximum*,<sup>48</sup> *bonitas* and *praesuppositio absoluta*.<sup>49</sup>

It is only in this context that we should consider ignorance as *doctissimum* and *verissimum*. The claim is not that human knowledge of the world is false and that the only way to achieve truth is by means of the negation of knowledge. The claim is that human knowledge of the world is based upon a foundation that cannot be denied by any sound intellect (the foundation is *verissimum*), but at the same token neither can it be ascertained, nor even asked about, without presupposing this most certain foundation in some way. Only a recognition of this cognitive impossibility is to be called *doctissimum*. A learned man is thus someone who understands what being learned means from the ground up, not someone who is simply able to engage in this or that scientific dispute. A learned man is someone who believes in the incomprehensible foundation more than in any comprehensible—and therefore posterior to the foundation—statement.

All of this had a tremendous impact on the idea of the organizing of the acquisition and enhancement of the knowledge available to a community. Should the foundation of knowledge be considered incomprehensible, it is not at all the same as the rejection of knowledge in favor of mysticism, nor as launching an attack on “schools” and “jargons” just because they are schools and jargons. Cusanus simply does not think this way and his triptych on the Layman is good evidence of that.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Cf. *De visione Dei* (h VI), IX, 36.

<sup>45</sup> *De apice theoriae* (h XII), 4–5.

<sup>46</sup> *De non aliud*, I, 5.

<sup>47</sup> *Sapientia*, II, 39.

<sup>48</sup> *Ignorantia*, I, X, 29.

<sup>49</sup> *Sapientia*, II, 29–30.

<sup>50</sup> The triptych consists of three dialogues: *Idiota de sapientia*, *Idiota de mente*, and *Idiota de staticis experimentis*. Here, I refer only to the first two.



*De sapientia* [On Wisdom], the first text of the triptych, begins with an expression of the Layman's astonishment with the attitude of the Orator, described as "pride"—*fastus*. It is a spiritual condition in which there is a sense of superiority, fastidiousness, and even disgust and irritation, as suggested by the semantic scope of the derived terms ("fastidiosus," "fastidium," "fastidio") with their modern counterparts in English, Italian, French etc. It is a morally repellent state of mind, but also simply unpleasant, being a regrettable idiosyncrasy. In this particular case, its source is a desire to go upward in social hierarchy, while "true knowledge makes [one] humble" (*vera scientia humiliat*) and, more importantly, gives joy (*laetitia*), since it is the discovering of the desired. Being so accused, the Orator bristles, asking the Layman in return about his own *praesumptio* that makes the Layman belittle sciences, without which no one makes progress or gains anything (*nemo proficit*). The noun "praesumptio" may signify presumption in the sense of arrogance and stubbornness, i.e., presumptuousness (and this is what the Orator means by it), but the Layman changes this meaning by referring to the original sense of the word, i.e., "a taking beforehand," "in advance" ('prae' + 'sumo', '-ere'). The Layman responds that what makes him speak is not *praesumptio* (in the sense of arrogance) but *caritas*, love.<sup>51</sup> The Layman means that the thing presupposed in his actions is love, not *fastus*.

In light of the above considerations on the theory of knowledge, the conversation becomes more legible: any investigation and any knowledge rest on love (since intellect learns in this way, by *amorusus amplexus*),<sup>52</sup> not on a desire to obtain a higher social status in a community of the learned. It is love that must be "presumed." Cusanus does not mean that knowledge should be based on love, because it would be immoral otherwise. He means that knowledge does indeed

---

<sup>51</sup> *Sapientia*, I, 1–2.

<sup>52</sup> *Ignorantia*, I, I, 2.

rest on love, because otherwise it is no knowledge at all. For knowledge must rely on the first principle that is to be intellectually discovered by *amorosus amplexus*, not by rational discourse. Otherwise, it would not serve the community in its striving to increase knowledge, while breaking up the community itself and causing the results gained by that community to crumble. Cusanus also points towards this sense of learned ignorance in his *Apologia* [Apology], in the context of the dispute with Wenck.<sup>53</sup>

The Orator asks the Layman: if there is no wisdom in the books of the wise, then where is it? The Layman responds that he does not claim that there is no wisdom in those books, but the kind of wisdom that we may get from these books is not “a natural nourishment” for the intellect (*pabulum naturale*). As mentioned above, the wisdom that is this nourishment proclaims itself openly in the streets. If we regard the authority of the wise as if it were intellect’s natural nourishment, the wise will lead us astray, passing on nothing of intellectual value.<sup>54</sup> The Orator expresses some difficulties with understanding this reasoning and asks the Layman for further explanation. The Layman agrees, but under one condition: he has to be asked for it *ex affectu*. Only then does he engage in his actual investigations.<sup>55</sup> The natural nourishment must be adequate for intellect’s natural desire which, as we read in *De venatione sapientiae* [On the Hunt for Wisdom], is a desire to know that God is infinite (it is not a desire to know what other people say).<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> *Apologia*, 10. Of course, it would be impossible to demonstrate how particular statements could become coordinated. Cusanus analyzes the issue in different places, mostly with regard to the problem of universals. In *The Layman*, he conducts such an analysis in the second chapter (Nicholas, *Layman*, II, 58–68, 536–541). In this paper, I only focus on the general structure of his strategy.

<sup>54</sup> *Sapientia*, 2–3.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>56</sup> *Venatio*, XII, 32.

In the second part of the triptych, *Idiota de mente* [The Layman on Mind], the Orator introduces the Philosopher to the Layman. At first, the Philosopher is depicted quite facetiously,<sup>57</sup> but he does not display any pride (*fastus*), nor does the Layman suspect him of that. Even before having the Philosopher introduced, the Orator points out that the crowds flocking to Rome at the time (“the countless people, from nearly all regions of the world”) have one faith that lets them grasp more clearly what philosophers can adhere to by reason.<sup>58</sup> The Philosopher comes to Rome in order to observe the scene and is led by an admiration from which, according to tradition, philosophy arises.<sup>59</sup> It is worth mentioning that the Philosopher is an Aristotelian, and even “foremost among all those philosophers now alive” (so he does not have to prove anything to anyone by acting out *fastus*). Having heard that the Layman was a worthy sage, he decided to get to know him as soon as possible in order to discover the value of the unlearned faith.<sup>60</sup> The Philosopher is also polite to the Layman, comparing him to Plato at the beginning of their conversation, and even though the Layman employs a different investigation strategy from the one employed by the Philosopher (i.e., the Layman does not ground his investigations in books), the Philosopher does not oppose this, therefore expressing no *praesumptio*.<sup>61</sup>

Having heard the Layman’s argument, the Philosopher notices and points out to him that, despite his declarative ignorance, the Layman essentially summarizes various opinions of philosophical schools. In

---

<sup>57</sup> Nicholas, *Layman*, I, 51, 533: “Recognizing him from the paleness of his face, from his long toga, and from other marks indicating the serious demeanor of a thoughtful man, the orator greeted him deferentially and asked why he remained standing in that spot.”

<sup>58</sup> Nicholas, *Layman*, I, 51–52, 533–534. Cf. *Idiota de mente* (h V), I, 51–52.

<sup>59</sup> Nicholas, *Layman*, I, 51, 533.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 51–53, 533–534.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 54–55, 534–535.

return, the Layman explains that “all these different modes—indeed, however many different modes might be conceived—are very easily reconciled and harmonized when the mind elevates itself unto infinity.”<sup>62</sup> Later in the conversation, the Philosopher agrees that the Layman has indeed demonstrated a concordance among all philosophers, because “none of them were able to deny that God is infinite—in which expression alone there is contained all that [the Layman] stated.”<sup>63</sup>

The question arises as to why any theological knowledge should have any impact on understanding the relation between all philosophical theories, and its only answer is to be found on the basis of the theory of knowledge outlined above. An alignment of the various results of knowledge is only possible from the perspective of the unity of the source from which all knowledge flows. As a summary, it is worth recalling the four elements of the theory of knowledge: (1) Knowledge is based on desire, (2) Wisdom is the highest form of knowledge, (3) Knowledge of truth is both difficult and easy, meaning that it requires the cooperation of the learned, (4) there is an unprovable, intellectual foundation of knowledge.

To summarize, Cusanus considers wisdom (2) to be a conjunction of an intellectual desire (1) with the first principle (4), which is to prevent knowledge from fragmentation, caused by cognitive difficulties and disputes (3), i.e., by the aforementioned “plurality of doubts.” It is not an attempt to destroy the dome of knowledge but rather a warning that one should not approach it without the proper spiritual attitude—a learned man must be driven by a sincere desire, he must be *vir admodum theoreticus* (a man utterly devoted to theoretical specula-

---

<sup>62</sup> Nicholas, *Layman*, II, 66–67, 540–541.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 71, 542–543.

<sup>64</sup> *De mente*, XV, 160.

tion).<sup>64</sup> Only in this way is it possible to prevent the fragmentation of community and to enable the aforementioned *proficere*, i.e., further progress, to ensue.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I intended to demonstrate the proper meaning of the term “docta ignorantia.” Beginning with an introduction of Gilson’s overall interpretation of Cusanus’s thought—one which is, I suspect, representative for many scholars, at least with regard to the emphasis put on an apophatic dimension of Cusanus’s thought—I go in a different direction by pointing towards (1) the Aristotelian source of Cusanus’s account of the structure of knowledge, and (2) the principal goal of Cusanus’s train of thought, the goal of which is to unravel the Christian meaning of practicing science. By the same token, I present his philosophy as oriented towards the benefit of knowledge rather than towards its refutation. The purpose of learned ignorance is not to refute science for the sake of private revelations, nor to reject the authority of acclaimed philosophers for the sake of novelties, but to reveal the mystical foundation of knowledge, before which all scholars should humble themselves in order to fruitfully search for the truth.

I do not know whether this interpretation of learned ignorance is convincing or not, and there are certainly some shortcomings in this paper due to its brevity. For example, I do not elaborate on the relation between cognitive desire and God’s infinity, a relation upon which the whole problem rests and might cause other interpretative problems. One of these problems is the need for the existence of the Mediator—i.e., Christ—between finite minds and an infinite God. In turn, this may have an impact on the potential for autonomous philosophical thinking. Furthermore, the idea that God is the unprovable principle of knowledge may lead us to question the sole possibility of proofs of His exist-

tence, or at least the value of such proofs, known from the philosophical tradition. In this context, Wenck might be correct in indicating that Cusanus is a threat to arguments “by which our faith is seen to be in no small measure confirmed against the infidels.”<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, I completely omit the question of the plurality of God’s names, despite it being at the core of Cusanus’s writings. Nor do I refer to philosophical traditions other than the Aristotelian, although Cusanus was influenced by other traditions as well (the fact that the Philosopher-Aristotelian compares the Layman to Plato, not Aristotle, is no coincidence).<sup>66</sup>

Yet it is no coincidence either that both of them very quickly come to agreement, which shows Cusanus’s attitude towards philosophical schools. Of course, he can be quite hostile to them, when, in his opinion, they refuse “to leap higher,”<sup>67</sup> but he is not hostile just because they exist. The stigma of *fastus* is quite foreign to his intellect, although Wenck and perhaps some modern scholars think that they can discern it there. The very structure of the Layman dialogues seems to confirm that. The Orator, who is a personification of this vice at the beginning, is convinced by the Layman to his arguments (or, at least, he develops some interest in them) not further than the paragraph 4 of the conversation. Then, the Orator introduces the Layman to the Philosopher, who needs no incentive at all to engage in a friendly dispute, since he is led by the same desire for truth.<sup>68</sup> It is perhaps a sign of Cusanus’s inability to create suspense, but I think that there is some theoretical optimism underneath. Cusanus seems to be optimistic about the persistence of an intellectual culture that is based on human nature and the possibility of reaching an agreement among the pursuers of truth if—and only if—they, in fact, search for truth. That kind of faith

---

<sup>65</sup> Wenck, *Unknown Learning*, 22, 427.

<sup>66</sup> *De mente*, I, 54–55.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. *Apologia*, 7.

<sup>68</sup> *Sapientia*, I, 4. *De mente*, I, 51–52.

may be naive, but it is not groundless, if Aristotle is right and people desire truth and knowledge by nature.

The metaphor of darkness is certainly quite suggestive and, in some contexts, adequate. On the other hand, it does not serve to help us understand Cusanus's philosophical attitude in its entirety, since it should not be portrayed as hopeless and gloomy with regard to knowledge available to people. The goal of Cusanus and his philosophy is, in fact, to reveal the infinite source of finite human knowledge, no matter how paradoxical this may sound. And it is not Plotinus who "provides a way out of Babel," as Gilson claims,<sup>69</sup> but a Christian faith that always seeks one, simple and infinite source of all things, no matter how manifold, tangled and confused they may seem.



Nicholas Cusanus and the Problem of Ignorance.  
A Minor Polemic with the Interpretation of Étienne Gilson

SUMMARY

Nicholas Cusanus is often seen as a pivotal figure in the history of Western philosophy. His writings are sometimes viewed as an attempt to reject the traditional scholarly knowledge, troubled by manifold tensions and crises, in order to prevent the collapse of Western Christianity under the weight of its complex architecture of knowledge. In this paper, I try to refute this mode of interpretation by highlighting the roots and structure of Cusanus's theory of knowledge that serve as the basis of his concept of *docta ignorantia*. I present the concept of *docta ignorantia* as being intended to serve the purpose of a unifying framework for academic discourse.

**Keywords:** Nicholas Cusanus, Étienne Gilson, Aristotle, wisdom, ignorance, knowledge, mysticism, first principles, natural desire, negative theology

---

<sup>69</sup> Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy*, 535.

## REFERENCES

- Aertsen, Jan A. "What is First and Most Fundamental?—The Beginnings of Transcendental Philosophy," *Miscellanea Mediaevalia* 26 (1998), 177–192.
- Aertsen, Jan A. *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought. From Philip the Chancellor (ca. 1225) to Francisco Suarez*. Leiden: Brill, 2012.
- Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Translated by C.D.C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2016.
- Aristotle. *Posterior Analytics*. In Aristotle. *Posterior Analytics. Topica*. Translated by H. Tredennick, E.S. Forster. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960. 24–261.
- Arystoteles. *Metafizyka* [Metaphysics], T. I. Translated by T. Żeleźnik. Edited by M.A. Krąpiec, A. Maryniarczyk. Lublin: RW KUL, 1996.
- Böhner, Philotheus and Étienne Gilson. *Historia filozofii chrześcijańskiej. Od Justyna do Mikołaja Kuzańczyka* [History of Christian philosophy. From Justin to Nicholas Cusanus]. Translated by S. Stomma. Warszawa: IW PAX, 1962.
- Copleston, Frederick. *A History of Philosophy, Vol. 2: Late Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy*. New York–London–Toronto–Sydney–Auckland: Doubleday, 1993.
- Gilson, Étienne. *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2019.
- Gilson, Étienne. *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950.
- Goldin, Owen. "Two Traditions in the Ancient Posterior Analytics Commentaries." In *Interpreting Aristotle's Posterior Analytics in Late Antiquity and Beyond*. Edited by F.A.J. De Haas, M. Leunissen, M. Martijn. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- Mikołaj z Kuzy. *O oświeconej niewiedzy* [On illuminated ignorance]. Translated by I. Kania. Warszawa: Aletheia, 2014.
- Nicholas of Cusa. *On Learned Ignorance*. Translated by J. Hopkins. Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1981.



- Nicholas of Cusa. *On Surmises*. Translated by J. Hopkins. In Jasper Hopkins. Nicholas of Cusa: *Metaphysical Speculations: Volume Two*. Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2000. 160–297.
- Nicholas of Cusa. *The Layman on Mind*. Translated by J. Hopkins. In Jasper Hopkins. *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge*. Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1996.
- Nicolaus De Cusa. *Opera omnia iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita*. Felix Meiner: Lipsia–Hamburgus, 1932:
- Apologia doctae ignorantiae* (h II).
- Compendium* (h XI/3).
- De apice theoriae* (h XII).
- De docta ignorantia* (h I).
- De non aliud* (h XIII).
- De venatione sapientiae* (h XII).
- De visione Dei* (h VI).
- Idiota de mente* (h V).
- Idiota de sapientia* (h V).
- Parry, Richard. “Episteme and Techne.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021 Edition). Edited by E.N. Zalta. Accessed March 19, 2023. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/episteme-techne/>.
- Reale, Giovanni. *Storia della filosofia antica* [History of Ancient Philosophy], Vol. II: *Platone e Aristotele*, [Plato and Aristotle]. Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1988.
- Wenck, John. *On Unknown Learning (De Ignota Litteratura)*. Translated by J. Hopkins. In Jasper Hopkins. *Nicholas of Cusa’s Debate with John Wenck. A Translation and an Appraisal of De Ignota Litteratura and Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*. Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1988. 425–456.