

Elements of Cusa's Concept of Wisdom

Von María del Carmen Paredes-Martín, Salamanca

To search for wisdom has been the defining effort of philosophy since Plato and Nicholas of Cusa usually described his intellectual life as a *venatio sapientiae*. We may say that all his important works document this search, but it is in the dialogue *Idiota de sapientia* where wisdom is the main subject of his concern. Nicholas emphasizes two very different points, the total transcendence of wisdom, on the one hand, and the ease with which it can be found by those who love and seek it, on the other.

1. The idea of wisdom

I shall start with a distinction between wisdom and other types of knowledge, in connection with the ease of teaching and learning. Cusa's notion of wisdom is mainly theoretical wisdom encompassing intellectual insight and the love of truth. Wisdom of this sort is not a kind of knowledge that may be achieved by study. Rather, it involves a personal experience that may gradually approach us to its highest object. Accordingly, we may say that this conception of wisdom contains different levels of a non-worldly wisdom, which can be attained by means of an ascending movement of the intellect.

For a general approach, I shall rely on Nicholas' words about his main insight – attained as he returned from Constantinople in the Winter of 1437/1438 – which did not come out of any other doctrine, but from his most inward heart. As he writes in the epilogue to *De docta ignorantia*, this insight refers to the manner he learned to »embrace in learned ignorance and through a transcending of the incorruptible truths which are humanly knowable – incomprehensible things incomprehensibly« (*ut incomprehensibilia incomprehensibiliter amplecterer in docta ignorantia per transcendens veritatum incorruptibilium humaniter scibilium*).¹ I take

1 *De docta ign.* III, Epistula auctoris: h I, p. 163, lin. 8–9. NICHOLAS OF CUSA, Complete

these words as a point of departure for my analysis of Cusa's concept of wisdom in *De sapientia*.

The dialogue between the orator and a *pauper quidam idiota* starts with the opposition between genuine wisdom and the wisdom of this world, and between the attitudes of poverty and humility in contrast with the pride and authority of writers and orators of all times. As different as their attitudes are the types of men represented by the interlocutors. There is, on one side, the orator, proud of his learning and presumably belonging to a professional class, and on the other side the unlearned and autonomous layman, representative of the new laity of the time.² Oratory was an integral part of Renaissance humanism. Whether or not the orator represents early humanism, he believes he knows what wisdom is, and is proud of his knowledge. In this respect, the orator conjoins the interest on wise men as discussed in the various traditions present the time, as well as the *devotio moderna*. The layman is humble about his abilities and does not understand the orator's eloquent language. Nonetheless, we find him (the *idiota*) being more learned than the orator, because of his recognition of ignorance.

The layman serves various functions in the dialogue: 1) he proposes complementary definitions of wisdom using the principle of *docta ignorantia*; 2) he sometimes develops the idea of wisdom by means of Cusa's mystical theology; 3) he offers objections to the concept of wisdom embodied in the culture of the humanists,³ as well as to the literary method to pursuit wisdom.⁴ The *idiota* leads the dialogue and conveniently poses the questions in order to find the way towards genuine wisdom. In this sense, the dialogue is inspired by a *methodical Platonism*, mainly visible

Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa, 2 vols, tr. by Jasper Hopkins, Minneapolis, Mn. 2001, 151.

2 Cusa's layman could also represent the German wit of the time. Cf. JOACHIM RITTER, Nicolaus von Cues, in: Das Deutsche in der deutschen Philosophie, Philosophische Gemeinschaftsarbeit deutscher Geisteswissenschaften, ed. Ferdinand Weinhandl, Stuttgart 1941, 86, cited by KLAUS KREMER, Praegustatio naturalis sapientiae. Gott suchen mit Nikolaus von Kues, Münster 2004, 515, 518. Cf. also RENATE STEIGER, Die Gestalt des idioten, in: Einleitung zu: NIKOLAUS VON KUES, Der Laie über die Weisheit, hg. v. Renate Steiger (Philosophische Bibliothek 411; Nikolaus von Kues in deutscher Übersetzung 1), Hamburg 1988, x-xviii.

3 The dialogue form was also a humanist genre.

4 Cf. Markus L. FÜHRER, Wisdom and Eloquence in Nicholas of Cusa's »Idiota de sapientia« and »de mente«, in: Vivarium 16 (1978) 142–155, 145.

in the development of the conversation. But the content of the discussion rests upon the great theological and philosophical ideas of Christian thought and the medieval tradition. As will be seen, upon these ideas Nicholas develops a new position in favour of a kind of non-worldly wisdom which encompasses intellectual insight and the love of truth.

Early in the dialogue, Cusa has his layman point out to the orator:

»The opinion of authority has led you back [...]. For your intellect, restricted to the authority of writings, is fed by strange and unnatural food.«⁵

This gives a preliminary clue about the theme under discussion: the possession of wisdom through the study of written learning or the pursuit of wisdom as an experience which nourishes the spirit. The reference to Plato's metaphor of food⁶ appears repeatedly in Cusa's idea of wisdom. Erudition is unnatural food that limits the possibilities of the orator's mind, whilst wisdom is the most attracting nourishment of our spirit.

In the following I will mention only some of the elements of Cusa's concept of wisdom. In fact, the complexity of this theme makes necessary to limit my study to Book I of *De Sapientia*, pointing out the most prominent aspects and influences.⁷ The various elements and experiences involved in the concept of wisdom are sustained by the basic conviction that »sapientia foris clamat in plateis [...], quoniam ipsa habitat in altissimis.«⁸ This appeal to Biblical texts stresses the ascending development of the dialogue in its search for wisdom.

5 *De sap.* I: h²V, n. 2, lin. 5–10; NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *Philosophical and Theological Treatises* (cf. note 1), 497.

6 Cf. PLATO, *Phaidros*, 247d.

7 On this, cf. HANS GERHARD SENGEL, *Griechisches und biblisch-patristisches Erbe im Cusanischen Weisheitsbegriff*, in: *Ludus sapientiae. Studien zum Werk und zur Wirkungsgeschichte des Nikolaus von Kues*, Leiden 2002, 197–227.

8 *De sap.* I: h²V, n. 3, lin. 14–16; cf. *Prv* 1,20: »Sapientia foris praedicat; In plateis dat vocem suam.« *Ecl* 24,7: »Ego in altissimis habitavi, Et thronus meus in columna nuvis«.

2. Wisdom as *unknowable* (*inscibilis*)

To begin with, we must acknowledge the ultimate inaccessibility of wisdom, so unequal in comparison to our natural desire for it:

»Hence, wisdom (which all men seek with such great mental longing [*affectu*], since by nature they desire to know) is known in no other way than that it is higher than all knowledge and is unknowable and is inexpressible by any speech, incomprehensible by any intellect, unmeasurable by any measure, unlimitable by any limit, unboundable by any bounds [...].«⁹

The superiority of *sapientia* means first that it is the only science which is wisdom at the same time, whilst the other kinds of knowledge belong to specific areas of human learning. The distinction goes back to the Greeks, primarily in its Platonist form, although Nicholas does not try to divide two sectors of the intelligible,¹⁰ but to delimit what is to be found at each side of the limit of intelligibility. Therefore, if every science relates to something knowable, expressible, intelligible and determinable according to different criteria of measure, if the objects of knowledge can be grasped by either of the faculties of cognition, or can be thought in various ways, wisdom goes beyond the limit of knowability, expression and thought and far beyond any positive or negative determination. Because wisdom is higher than all knowledge it does not partake any of knowledge's properties. Its unknowability entails a series of qualifications: Wisdom is

»[...] disproportional in terms of any proportion, incomparable in terms of any comparison, unbefigurable by any befiguring, unformable by any forming, immovable by any movement, unimaginable by any imagining, unsensible by any sensing, unattractable by any attracting, untasteable by any tasting, inaudible by any hearing, unseeable by any seeing, inapprehensible by any apprehending, unaffirmable by any affirming, undeniable by any negating, undoubtable by any doubting, inopinable by any opining.«¹¹

Nicholas of Cusa places wisdom beyond any sort of reasoning, in terms that it had not been before. Augustine, in his early dialogue *Contra Academicos*, states that wisdom is »not only a knowledge of, but also a diligent quest of, things human and things divine that pertain to the

9 *De sap.* I: h²V, n. 9, lin. 2–9; NICHOLAS OF CUSA, Philosophical and Theological Treatises (cf. note 1), 501.

10 Cf. PLATO, *Republic* 509d.

11 *De sap.* I: h²V, n. 9, lin. 9–20; NICHOLAS OF CUSA, Philosophical and Theological Treatises (cf. note 1), 501.

happy life«. ¹² In this quest, Augustine argues against scepticism that it is possible for any man to know truth and learn the first principles of faith. ¹³ In Scholasticism, wisdom was known both by reason and by a faith which could be understood by reason. Thomas Aquinas, for example, sometimes speaks of wisdom as »a knowledge of the highest causes and a knowledge of divine things«. ¹⁴ Wisdom is attained to some extent by the study of metaphysics and theology, although ultimately man needs a supernatural aid to disclose the nature of divine things.

In contrast, Cusa speaks very differently and emphasizes the contradictions which the very notion of wisdom implies for the human mind. All the above mentioned paradoxical properties make evident the outstanding value of wisdom with respect to knowledge and its incomparability in all comparison. In *De docta ignorantia*, he contends that all search for knowledge needs to establish a proportional comparison between what is known and what is unknown. ¹⁵ But this does not apply to wisdom, because – being unknowable – it is »disproportional in terms of any proportion, incomparable in terms of any comparison«. For this reason, wisdom cannot be equated with the mass of culture contained in books. The science of books is chained to the authority of writers and conditioned by the circumstances of their time. Wisdom, on the contrary, cannot be found in the area of culture, cannot derive from it; we could say, too, that wisdom illuminates culture with a new sense and also illuminates the human soul setting it free from its subjection to the hegemony of culture. Cusa combines the use of contradictory appellatives to show how the unknowability of wisdom can be positively expressed. Thus, wisdom shares the contradictions of the beyond. This is not a senseless expression. It has the epistemological sense that derives from the knowledge of one's own ignorance.

¹² AUGUSTINE, *Contra Academicos*, I 8, 23.

¹³ Cf. MARIA DEL CARMEN PAREDES-MARTIN, Significado metódico de la búsqueda de la certeza en *Contra Académicos*, in: Cuadernos Salmantinos de Filosofía XVII (1990) 307–322.

¹⁴ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica* I, 1, 6^c.

¹⁵ »Omnes autem investigantes in comparatione praesuppositi certi proportionabiliter incertum iudicant. Comparativa igitur est omnis inquisitio medio proportionis utens.« *De docta ign.* I, 1: h I, p. 6, lin. 16–18.

Socrates spoke of his ignorance in irony, but there is no irony in Nicholas of Cusa. Nicholas connects the acknowledgement of ignorance with the old wisdom of Pythagoras and Aristotle as well as the biblical wisdom of Proverbs and Ecclesiasticus. Augustine and Bonaventure spoke about ignorance as expression of a state of the soul able to receive God's spirit. For Nicholas, knowing (*scire*) is ignoring (*ignorare*)¹⁶ inasmuch as knowing begins when the sound and free intellect becomes aware of the disproportion between its capacity and what it seeks. The two factors in his *De docta ignorantia* are also a combination of contradictory appellatives. From an epistemological point of view, learned ignorance is higher than the belief in established doctrines and the acceptance of unquestioned claims to truth. In fact, it is not a type of belief; it is the certainty of someone who »knows« the incomprehensible and does not know it, because it remains incomprehensible.¹⁷ In this way, Cusa's ignorance emerges as a mode of consciousness, indeed a very specific one; it is no simple negative ignorance or the pure darkness of unknowing.¹⁸ It is not merely a state of mind; it differs also from the modern consciousness about the limits of human knowledge. In fact, it is a *learned* or *knowing* ignorance which forms part of the search for wisdom as its epistemological presupposition. Learned ignorance also belongs to the activity of cognition, both as process and product, and enables the mind to admit, even if in ignorance, that each phase of cognition has a kind of certainty which is only relative, and characteristically hypothetical.

For these reasons, the layman's ignorance enables him to help the orator in finding the way towards authentic wisdom. Only those who are well instructed in their own ignorance can grasp the idea of wisdom and find the way by which the unattainable can be attained unattainably.¹⁹ The unattainable denotes, the moment, what is outside the process of knowledge and its possibilities to ascend in hierarchical stages of cogni-

16 »Nihil enim homini etiam studiosissimo in doctrina perfectius adveniet quam in ipsa ignorantia, quae sibi propria est, doctissimus reperiri.« *De docta ign.* I, 1: h I, p. 4, lin. 13–15.

17 On this, cf. DONALD F. DUCLOW, *Masters of Learned Ignorance: Eriugena, Eckhart, Cusanus* (Variorum collected studies series 851), Aldershot 2006.

18 Cf. MARIANO ÁLVAREZ-GÓMEZ, *Die verborgene Gegenwart des Unendlichen bei Nikolaus von Kues* (Epimeleia 10), München 1968, 43.

19 Cf. *De sap.* I, h 2V, n. 7, lin. 15–16; *De docta ign.* I, 4: h I, p. 11, lin. 6–7.

tion.²⁰ It is also what cannot be measured, comprehended or put into rational concepts. As unknowable and ineffable, the unattainable is beyond knowledge, thought and speech, as well as beyond affirmation, doubt and negation.

3. The *taste* (*gustus*) of Wisdom

Now, if the unattainable is beyond speech, how can we speak about it? Here we should remember that Nicholas' concept of wisdom involves an innermost experience of the highest, even though the experience is such that it cannot become ordinary speech. Instead, we can talk about wisdom as the spiritual nourishment of the intellect. All knowledge found in wise men cannot be compared with this food, for it consists in an originating experience which provides the intellect with spiritual plenitude. Unlike erudition, it is an experience that belongs to the immediacy of existence and it can be attained both by the ignorant and the wise.

The taste of wisdom sets apart all academic instruction. It also evidences the limits of traditional definitions:

»Wisdom is what is intellectually relishable; nothing is more delightful to the intellect than is Wisdom. Those men are not to be deemed in any way wise who speak [about Wisdom] only nominally and not with relish.«²¹

The elements of taste, or relish, yearning and desire conjoin in the living experience of wisdom. They go back to the Augustinian tradition and mediaeval mysticism; they also preclude all learning coming from outside. Wisdom is experienced with an inner relishing because it has savour – *sapientia* as *sapida scientia* –, as St. Isidore of Seville, among others, wrote.²² Taste has a prominent place in Cusa's doctrine of spiritual senses²³ and

20 Cf. *De coni.* II, 16: h III, n. 157, lin. 12–25; *De mente* 4: h ²V, n. 77, lin. 11–19.

21 »Sapientia est quae sapit, qua nihil dulcius intellectui. Neque censendi sunt quovismodo sapientes qui verbo tantum et non gustu loquuntur.« *De sap.* I: h ²V, n. 10, lin. 8–10; NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *Philosophical and Theological Treatises* (cf. note 1), 501.

22 Cf. ISIDORE DE SEVILLA, *Etimologías*, X n. 240. (latin-Spanish), ed. J. Oroz Reat and Manuel A. Marcos Casquero (Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos 433), Madrid 1982; Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, I q. 43, a. 5; Eccl 6, 23.

23 Cf. KLAUS REINHARDT, *Die Lehre von den geistlichen Sinnen bei Nikolaus von Kues* (La doctrina de los sentidos espirituales en Nicolás de Cusa), in: *Metafísica y experiencia. Homenaje a Mariano Álvarez-Gómez*, ed. by Maria del Carmen Paredes-Martín, Salamanca 2012, 133–148.

functions as a guiding line to search for new relations between infinity and the finite in the field of wisdom. And yet, the taste of wisdom does not correspond to any determinate savour:

»For all inner relishing is by means of wisdom and in wisdom and from wisdom. But because wisdom dwells in the highest places, it is not tasteable by means of any savouring. Therefore, it is tasted untasteably, since it is higher than everything tasteable, everything sensible, everything rational, and everything intelligible.«²⁴

Therefore, we are not asked to examine any kind of sensation or *sensibilia*, for there is no analogy between the embodied senses and the taste of wisdom. The concept of analogy presupposes proportion, and Cusa established in *De docta ignorantia* that there is no proportion between the finite and the infinite. Now, Cusa shows how the infinite is in all things but is nothing determinate and concrete. Thus, wisdom is untasteably tasteable and is everywhere and nowhere, because the intensity of its non-sensible savour exceeds all measure. There are two additional elements involved here: 1) that the experience of wisdom enlivens our own intellectual life²⁵ and 2) that the access to it requires an untasteable foretasting. The first point makes clear that sense experience does not belong to wisdom as such. The purpose of starting with sensation is only to adjust man to his finitude. But what external sense experience can produce is just an acquaintance with facts, or what we call today »propositional knowledge«, that is, a knowledge expressible in terms of »to know that« this is (or is not) the case. On the contrary, the taste of wisdom appeals to a very different experience; it is neither external sense experience nor internal apperception or introspection. Nicholas develops a conception of wisdom which includes its realization in men. And here again the encounter between the infinite and the finite occurs in connection with the originating element of taste. This leads us to the second point.

There is a »connatural foretaste« (*connaturata praegustatio*)²⁶ of wisdom in us. In *Idiota de sapientia* Cusa gives different examples about

24 »Per sapientiam enim et in ipsa et ex ipsa est omne internum sapere. Ipsa autem, quia in altissimis habitat, non est omni sapore gustabilis. Ingustabiliter ergo gustatur, cum sit altior omni gustabili, sensibili, rationali, et intellectuali.« *De sap.* I, h²V, n. 10, lin. 12–16; NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *Philosophical and Theological Treatises* (cf. note 1), 501 f.

25 I thank Donald F. Duclow for his remarks on this point.

26 *De sap.* I, h²V, n. 11, lin. 2–3.

this, but I will only refer here to its intellectual content. This connatural foretaste is explained by means of desire and life. First, all men desire to know wisdom. Cusa specifies that this desire is accompanied with mental longing or affection, and that it is wisdom only what the intellectual desire seeks: »omnes homines, cum natura scire desiderent, cum tanto mentis affectu quaerunt.«²⁷ This desire has the function to start the spiritual movement towards wisdom, so that without it the pursuit of wisdom would not exist. Accordingly, the *desiderium intellectuale* is the beginning of the movement and relation between man and wisdom. And it is through this foretaste that longing for the infinite is awakened in the soul. Much more, the intellectual desire also tells us something about human intellect and the possibility of its relation to wisdom. For there must be a kind of affinity between our intellect and supreme wisdom in order to establish this type of relation; in other words, it belongs to the nature or character of human intellect to have such a kind of desire.

Nevertheless, if we were not appealed by wisdom, we would never come to it. This means that wisdom's attracting force initiates the movement of our desire for it, so that if the *desiderium intellectuale* is the beginning of our movement to wisdom, wisdom itself is the principle, the source of action of that beginning:

For if someone seeks wisdom by an intellectual movement, being affected inwardly and becoming oblivious of himself, he is caught up (in the body but as if outside the body) into foretasted delightfulness (the weight of all sensible objects cannot hold him down) – caught up into the point where he is united to attracting wisdom.²⁸

The presence of this foretaste of wisdom alludes to this double – and asymmetrical – movement: the attracting force of wisdom and our longing for it. The natural and the transcendent levels of wisdom emerge in this experience of the absolutely prior, that which is before and after every thinkable object. It is also through this foretaste that the ontological and gnoseological primacy of wisdom²⁹ appears in the form of a pre-

27 *De sap.* I, h²V, n. 9, lin. 3–4. On »affectus« as cognitive apriori, cf. KLAUS KREMER, *Praegustatio naturalis sapientiae*. Gott suchen mit Nikolaus von Kues (Buchreihe der Cusanus-Gesellschaft; Sonderbeitrag zur Philosophie des Cusanus), Münster 2004, 103 ff.

28 »Qui enim quaerit motu intellectibili sapientiam, hic interne tactus ad praegustatam dulcedinem sui oblitus rapitur in corpore quasi extra corpus (omnium sensibilibus pondus eum tenere nequit) quousque se uniat attrahenti sapientiae.« *De sap.* I, h²V, n. 17, lin. 5–9; NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *Philosophical and Theological Treatises* (cf. note 1), 505.

29 Cf. KLAUS KREMER, *Praegustatio*, (cf. note 25) 54.

cognition or pre-knowing which builds up and conveys our desire to its ultimate aim.

Through this foretaste the intellectual spirit seeks, with very great endeavour, the source of its life. Without a foretaste it would neither seek this source nor know that it has found it, if it did find it.³⁰

Accordingly, this foretaste is a presupposition for the intellect's pursuit and anticipates its plenitude. Indeed, it is much more than an epistemological presupposition, for it permeates all human capacities involved in the search for wisdom and, in a certain degree, actually brings forth the presence of what we seek. From man's perspective, this is possible by means of the dialogical structure of foretaste, which produces and maintains the communication between the intellect and wisdom. Furthermore, foretasting prefigures the assimilation of our intellect to wisdom, an assimilation which presents a living image of the most desired object.

4. Wisdom as life (*vita*)

The foretasting of wisdom transforms the process of cognition in the search for the source of life: the spiritual »spring« where we can find clear waters, mostly unknown. The philosophical use of this metaphor goes back to Platonism,³¹ and evokes the return to an original, unaltered truth. The epistemological quest entails that the knowledge of truth requires a certain presence of it beforehand, in such a way that the process of cognition implies a recognition. Besides, the relish for wisdom produces a deepening of our own being, for it constrains us to tend towards ourselves in order to go beyond ourselves.³² In this context, we can find another motive to disassociate the search for true wisdom from the study of books. Cusa objects to the secular ideal of wisdom an art of living (*ars*

30 »[...] per quam [praegustationem] tanto studio inquit fontem vitae suae, quem sine praegustatione non quaereret nec se repperisse sciret, si reperiret: hinc ad eam ut ad propriam suam vitam movetur.« *De sap.* I, h²V, n. 11, lin. 4–6; NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *Philosophical and Theological Treatises* (cf. note 1), 502.

31 Cf. PLATO, *Phaidros*, 245 c.

32 Cf. MARIANO ÁLVAREZ-GÓMEZ, »Añoranza y conocimiento de Dios en la obra de N. de Cusa«, in: *Wahrheit und Verkündigung, Michel Schmaus zum 70. Geburtstag*, hg. v. Leo Scheffczyk/Werner Dettloff/Richard Heinzmann, München/Paderborn/Wien 1967, 656.

vivendi) which ties man to the finite order to such an extent that he is distracted from the pursuit of the true life.

Wisdom is »the life of the intellectual spirit (*vita spiritus intellectualis*)«³³ and the power of this life consists in bringing forth from itself the elevating movement to its own object. Intellectual spirit is, ontologically, the highest grade of human's mind and, epistemologically, the supreme faculty in the scheme of the stages of knowledge. For this reason, the image of wisdom is apprehended as intellectual life.³⁴ Cusa emphasizes the internal relation between truth, wisdom and intellectual life. Assimilation is always part of this relation and reveals the mind's capacity to approach its own object. As refers to wisdom, it is the movement of intellectual spirit that causes the likeness between the living image and its perfect exemplar. This movement does not entail a deduction or a process of reasoning, these activities belonging to the *ratio*. Instead, the intellect proceeds by grasping in the mode of vision (or *contemplatio*) the unity of those objects that present a similarity with itself. Hence, the intellectual spirit only apprehends something pertaining to the highest kind of life; in other words, its apprehension requires a certain correspondence between the intellect and its object.³⁵

Furthermore, this supreme level of intellect is related to the dialogical structure of the *praegustatio*, which derives from the internal relationship between the *desiderium intellectuale* and *sapientia*. Accordingly, Nicholas qualifies the intellect's apprehension (*intelligere*) as intellectual tasting (*gustare intellectualiter*).³⁶ The fact that Nicholas insists on these relationships in terms of movement enables us to interpret them in terms of intentionality. I would say that there is a pre-intentional relationship between the *praegustatio* and the *desiderium intellectuale*, which impels the diligent quest of something unknown and unknowable; and there is an intentional movement of the intellect towards the source of its life. This higher level of intentionality can attain its intended object, »for the life of the image cannot find rest in itself, since the image's life is not its

33 *De sap.* I, h²V, n. 11, lin. 1; NICHOLAS OF CUSA, Philosophical and Theological Treatises (cf. note 1), 502.

34 Cf. *De sap.* I, h²V, n. 26, lin. 3–5.

35 Cf. *De mente*, 7: h²V, n. 100, lin. 1–5.

36 *De sap.* I: h²V, n. 26, lin. 8–9.

own but is derived from the original's life.«³⁷ Intentionality serves here as a means to disclose the intellect's movement unto wisdom from an epistemological perspective, although it does not explain the origin of the movement itself. The image cannot have an independent life because it is not an appearance or an imitation, although its truth dwells in an infinite life. Besides that, Cusa's contrast of the image and its truth requires to deepen into other elements of his conception of wisdom.

We can conclude from the above, that it is in wisdom where we find our own beginning and the reason of our existence. It is through wisdom how we can get the spiritual nourishment of the intellect.³⁸ This also points out the superiority of wisdom as compared with other kinds of knowledge. For we seek wisdom »not with reference to the act of comprehending but with reference to the most beloved treasure of life«.³⁹

5. Wisdom as the Equality of being

The metaphysical weight of Cusa's conception of wisdom is explicitly shown with this thesis: the affirmation of wisdom as the equality of being. Equality of being (*essendi qualitas*) is not just one more element of wisdom among others. It corresponds to the ontological status of things. Hence, each thing, in order to exist and to be a thing such as it is, has need of wisdom to become unified within itself and related to other finite things. This does not mean that Nicholas is advocating a kind of irrational mysticism. On the contrary, he proceeds with the notion of true wisdom as the ontological ground of each and every finite thing and the universe as a whole. In virtue of this ground, each thing can be, in spite of its finiteness, a true image of being and share a portion of the universe's intelligibility.

Now, we may ask ourselves how to consider the meaning of wisdom as the equality of being. About this, we can look for a relationship be-

37 »Vita enim imaginis non potest in se quiescere, cum sit vita vitae veritatis et non sua.« *De sap.* I: h ²V, n. 18, lin. 7–8; NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *Philosophical and Theological Treatises* (cf. note 1), 505 f.

38 Cf. *De ven. sap.* I: h XII, n. 2, lin. 3.

39 *De sap.* I: h ²V, n. 11, lin. 19–20; NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *Philosophical and Theological Treatises* (cf. note 1), 502.

tween wisdom as »intellectual life« and wisdom as the »equality of being«. For Nicholas, the life of wisdom is such that it involves a transformative experience. This is not just a cognitive experience, but a turning point in our life: it involves the whole life and soul of someone who seeks wisdom. For the unceasing movement towards wisdom cannot find its aim unless a change in our life occurs, to the extent that it does not suffice to know (*non sufficit scire*) something about wisdom; it is necessary that after we find it we make it our own. But in order to achieve this, we must abandon everything we have and our own finite being.

Therefore, to find wisdom requires depriving oneself of everything, and only this act of dispossession makes possible the attainment of wisdom. First of all, we must deprive ourselves of all moral failing and prepare in us a pure field suitable for wisdom's holy temple.⁴⁰ But this is not enough, since it is necessary to carry out a total relinquishment in order to have an encounter with wisdom. Here the emphasis on inwardness and relinquishment suggests a mystical experience beyond all understanding, an experience that enables us »to leave behind this world and this life«; an apprehension of the absolute whereby our self »is caught up in the body but as if outside the body« (*rapitur in corpore quasi extra corpus*).⁴¹ This change leaves behind all knowledge as well as intellectual life in an epistemological sense. Mystical experience admits of wide variations, mainly corresponding to the faculties of thinking, willing and feeling. In *De sapientia*, the kind of mystical experience involved is not a state of emotionalism that leaves the soul at the mercy of agitation; instead, it provides serenity in a spirit of nonattachment. As Nicholas writes: »His leaving behind the senses renders the soul senseless because of stupefying amazement, so that he esteems as nothing all things except wisdom.«⁴²

All finite things must be considered as nothing. Therefore, our finite being also is left behind and, as it were, »forgotten« in this new state of

⁴⁰ Cf. *De sap.* I: h ²V, n. 20, lin. 7–8; I Cor 3,16.

⁴¹ *De sap.* I, h ²V, n. 17, lin. 7–8; NICHOLAS OF CUSA, Philosophical and Theological Treatises (cf. note 1), 505; cf. note 23. Mystical expressions can be found in Sections 15 to 20 of *De sap.* I.

⁴² »Ex stupida admiratione sensum linquens insanire facit animam, ut cuncta praeter eam penitus nihili faciat.« *De sap.* I, h ²V, n. 17, lin. 10–11; NICHOLAS OF CUSA, Philosophical and Theological Treatises (cf. note 1), 505.

amazement – *stupida admiration* –, void of corporeal and spiritual feeling. Only wisdom remains and teaches us now that our spirit, turned towards wisdom, can never perish. »For infinite wisdom is our life's unfailing nourishment. From this nourishment our spirit – which can love only wisdom and truth – lives eternally.«⁴³

So we know that wisdom is the true beginning of our spirit's intellectual mode of being (*principium sic intellectualiter essendi*).⁴⁴ And we know too that the intellect's desire for wisdom corresponds to its desire to exist (*omnis enim intellectus appetit esse*).⁴⁵ Nicholas applies the notion of ontological equality in its full sense. He defines equality in *De docta ignorantia* as the »absence in a given thing of more or less, nothing added, nothing subtracted. For if a thing is more, it is monstrous; if less, it ceases to be.«⁴⁶ Equality is the power of a being to subsist in itself, to be no more and no less than it is, to be itself. But this subsistence cannot be understood as equality unless we refer it to the infinite equality: God, »who can be said to be *Oneness*, or *Being* (*unitas seu entitas*), because by His omnipotence He causes-to-exist that which previously was nothing.«⁴⁷ Therefore, wisdom is the equality-of-being inasmuch as each and everything has its own being, and maintains its being as identical with itself. Due to this equality each thing persists in its being and also changes continuously, in search for its essential equality. In fact, things are never equal in themselves, they are rather more or less equal to their own being, but this does not cancel the principle of the equality-of-being; on the contrary, it explains the ontological difference between finite things and wisdom as the equality-of-being. The fact that *we know* this depends on our state of nonattachment to things, to the extent that to know that wisdom is the equality-of-being is to be dispossessed of everything of our own. This act of dispossession is necessary too for the mere

43 *De sap.* I, h²V, n. 12, lin. 18–20, n. 13, lin. 1; NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *Philosophical and Theological Treatises* (cf. note 1), 503.

44 *De sap.* I, h²V, n. 17, lin. 2.

45 *De sap.* I, h²V, n. 13, lin. 1–2.

46 »Aequalitas vero essendi est, quod in re neque plus neque minus est; nihil ultra, nihil infra. Si enim in re magis est, monstruosum est; si minus est, nec est.« *De docta ign.* I, 8: h I, p. 22, lin. 10–13.

47 »Et est deus pater, qui dici potest unitas seu entitas, quia necessitat esse, quod erat nihil, ex omnipotentia sua.« *De sap.* I: h²V, n. 22, lin. 6–8; NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *Philosophical and Theological Treatises* (cf. note 1), 507.

reason that Cusa's equality-of-being is not an equality of fact belonging to things in themselves. It is an essential and infinite equality: the equality which is absolute with respect to concept, word and knowledge.⁴⁸

6. Wisdom as eternal *principium*

If the equality of being and its formal fecundity is equated with wisdom, it can only be understood when we recognize *sapientia* as our *principium*. Wisdom is the formal principle of creation, therefore, the infinite form of all formable forms and the most precise equality of them all.⁴⁹ This principle is not subordinated to existence, knowledge and time. It is therefore eternal and absolute, free from the transient flow of all existing things and free from the imperfections of human spirit. So we can ask, with the orator: »Is Eternal wisdom anything other than God?«⁵⁰ The dialogue makes evident that man's longing for wisdom is, ultimately, a desire for God.⁵¹ The orator does not provide any confirmation, but poses the question to the layman. The need of the question shows how the human soul moves always from learned ignorance to the quest of the unknown. And, as a question that arises *ex affectu*,⁵² the desire for God is a precondition of the question. It could be added that at this point of the dialogue the orator's interest in wisdom and truth has reached its zenith in comparison with his initial position, when he met the layman and asked him to speak out his secrets.⁵³ The layman's answer is, as expected, the expression of what has been already talked about. This answer: »absit quod aliud, sed est deus«⁵⁴ sums up all the elements of wisdom and gives them its true justification.

48 Werner Beierwaltes considers *aequalitas* as the encompassing and universal category of reality in Nicholas of Cusa. WERNER BEIERWALTES, *Denken des Einen. Studien zur neuplatonischen Philosophie und ihrer Wirkungsgeschichte*, Frankfurt a.M. 1985, 368–384.

49 cf. *De sap.* I: h²V, n. 20, lin. 9–12.

50 *De sap.* I: h²V, n. 21, lin. 4–5; NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *Philosophical and Theological Treatises* (cf. note 1), 507.

51 On this, cf. KLAUS KREMER, *Weisheit als Voraussetzung und Erfüllung der Sehnsucht des menschlichen Geistes*, in: MFCG 20 (1992) 105–141.

52 *De sap.* I: h²V, n. 7, lin. 6.

53 »Multum desidero te audire, et ex paucis inflammor.« *De sap.* I: h²V, n. 7, lin. 5.

54 *De sap.* I: h²V, n. 21, lin. 5.

From a human point of view, several reasons can be found. 1) Wisdom is eternal and infinite because unity and infinity belong only to God. 2) To say that »God made all things in Wisdom«⁵⁵ is the same as saying that He created all things in His Word.

Since God is absolute unity, He is the absolute *prius* which precedes and contains all things. As infinite unity, He is the ultimate ground and reason of the finite order, its existence, development and appearance. Above all, God is absolute and infinite unity in a Christian sense; therefore, He is uncreated unity. This means that besides the philosophical concepts of infinity and finitude, unity and multiplicity, identity and otherness, we must take into account all those concepts pertaining to creation. Hence, Wisdom – God – is the principle of all being:

»For the [*principium*] of all things is that by means of which, in which and from which whatever can be originated is originated [*principiatur*]; and, nevertheless [...] [it] cannot be attained unto by any originated thing. It is that by means of which, in which and from which everything that is [intelligible] is [intellected]; and, nevertheless, it cannot be attained unto by the intellect. Likewise, it is that by means of which, in which and from which everything that can be [said] is [said]; and nevertheless, it cannot be attained unto by speech.«⁵⁶

Nicholas formulates here a dialectic which asserts both that all things are derived from the principle and also that the principle cannot be reached from any of the things derived from it. This dialectic is applied in all contexts, whenever the principle is involved.⁵⁷ As stated before, we must understand this principle as one creating principle. And, identifying *sapientia* with *principium*, we must admit that Wisdom is not a creature, for before every creature there is wisdom. Therefore, God's Word is the Wisdom of created wisdom. And Wisdom is God's creating Word. All the wisdom found by man comes from the Wisdom which is God. And now we have a new and concrete sense of the affirmation that »wisdom dwells in the highest places«. For »the highest which cannot be higher«⁵⁸

55 *De sap.* I: h²V, n. 22, lin. 1; NICHOLAS OF CUSA, Philosophical and Theological Treatises (cf. note 1), 507.

56 *De sap.* I: h²V, n. 8, 6–12; NICHOLAS OF CUSA, Philosophical and Theological Treatises (cf. note 1), 500f.

57 »Dico autem, quod, sicut iam ante de unitate, uncia, et petito dixi, ita de omnibus quoad omnium principium dicendum.« *De sap.* I: h²V, n. 8, lin. 4–5; »Idiota: Sic igitur hoc sic est, nonne solum absolutum principium est infinitum, quia ante principium non est principium.« *De mente* 2: h²V, n. 61, lin. 1–4.

58 *De sap.* I: h²V, n. 9, lin. 1; NICHOLAS OF CUSA, Philosophical and Theological Treatises (cf. note 1), 501.

must be God's uncreated Wisdom. We see clearly, then, that there is uncreated and created wisdom.

Furthermore, the principle of all things, »by means of which, in which and from which« all things are created is to be understood in accordance with the mystery of Trinity, which is fundamental to Cusa's idea of wisdom. In itself, wisdom is absolute because it enfolds its internal relationship to the three Persons of the Trinity. This allows the use of the terminology of being in terms of *unitas*, *aequalitas* and *connexio*, as well as to think of wisdom as a triune *principium*.⁵⁹ It also allows thinking of wisdom as »God the Father's Art«,⁶⁰ which is a most simple form present in all forms and which communicates itself to all things. The metaphoric about the Exemplar and the image as well as the roll of *assimilatio* support the discourse about God and His eternal Wisdom. For God is the essential and infinite equality of true and perfect Wisdom; He is too the beingness of being. It is in this sense that we recognize *sapientia* as our *principium*.

All the elements of Cusa's conception of wisdom are reciprocally related by means of a movement which explicates their internal relationship. This movement impels also the movement of our spirit in the right way, that is, we move in learned ignorance from reason and intellect to that which transcends them.

59 Cf. *De sap.* I: h²V, n. 22–23.

60 *De sap.* I: h²V, n. 23, lin. 21, cf. ebd., n. 25, lin. 78.