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Nicholas of Cusa and the *mens ipsa*. Notes on a long-standing debate

Nicola Cusano e la *mens ipsa*. Appunti su un lungo dibattito

Abstract

Una lunga tradizione esegetica (Koch, Flasch, Senger, Peroli, Fiamma) ha da tempo riconosciuto la peculiarità della teoria della *mens ipsa*, formulata in *De coniecturis* I, 4. D'altro canto, le ipotesi interpretative su questa dottrina restano ancora aperte: se si tratti di una teoria esposta in quella sede e mai più recuperata, ovvero se abbia ripercussioni anche su altri trattati; se si tratti di una teoria ontologica (cioè, che descrive l'essere della realtà) ovvero una teoria fenomenologica (cioè, che studia i modi del conoscere umano); e non è mancato chi, come Flasch, ha letto nella *mens ipsa* un primo tentativo di una filosofia dello spirito. Con questo contributo si vuole prendere posizione all'interno di questo dibattito di lunga durata: la dottrina della *mens ipsa* permane oltre il *De coniecturis*, ed è sviluppata sia in direzione ontologica (*De dato patris luminum*) sia in direzione gnoseologica (*De mente* II).

Keywords: *mens ipsa*; categorie; ontologia; mente humana; spirito.

Abstract

A long scholarship (Koch, Senger, Peroli, Fiamma) recognized the peculiarity of Nicholas of Cusa's theory of *mens ipsa*, exposed in *De coniecturis* I, 4. However, there are several alternative readings of that ambiguous theory: indeed, it is not clear whether that theory appears only in *De coniecturis* or also in other later works. In addition, it has been described variously as an ontological doctrine, concerning the being of the universe, and as a gnoseological one, concerning the human faculties

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of knowledge. Some scholars, like Flasch, even saw in the *mens ipsa* a forerunning of a theory of spirit. With this paper I want to take a position on this long-standing debate: the theory of *mens ipsa* remains over the *De coniecturis* and it is developed both in ontological (*De dato patris luminum*) and in gnoseological (*De mente II*) direction.

Keywords: *mens ipsa*; categories; ontology; human mind; spirit.

Introduction

Nicholas of Cusa defines the concept of *mens ipsa* in a famous passage from *De coniecturis* I. *Mens ipsa* is that mind which counts on three specific activities: namely, *ambire*, *lustrare*, *comprehendere omnia*, which mean to encompass, to survey, to grasp everything – *i.e.* every created thing¹. For these reasons, it is a divine prerogative, for only God can dispose of these faculties upon the universe of created things. However, this identification entails some theoretical difficulties: how can this mind embrace and, at the same time, comprehend everything? Is it an ontological container, which includes all the created beings inside, or rather a gnoseological function, which contemplates and understands everything? The following lines of the *De coniecturis* do not but complicate this ambiguity: «it is so present in all things, and all things in it», but at the same time «there can be nothing which is beyond it itself and which escapes its purview».

1. State of the art

There has been a little analysis of this issue in the last fifty years of research about the *mens ipsa* and about its main theoretical consequence, namely the theory of the four unities (the so-called *Quaternar*), even though it was a fundamental concept of Cusa's thought. In this respect, it is significant to remark that a few years ago even the origin of the *mens ipsa* still appeared doubtful: in 1998, Kurt Flasch, a master of Cusa's scholarship, had doubts about the influence of Proclus on

¹ Nicholai de Cusa *De coniecturis*, I, 4, 12 (trans. by Hopkins, *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*, 2 Vols., Minneapolis 2001, p. 168): «Mens ipsa omnia se ambire omniaque lustrare comprehendereque supponens, se in omnibus atque omnia in ipsa esse taliter concludit, ut extra ipsam ac quod eius obtutum aufugiat nihil esse posse affirmet. Contemplatur itaque in numerali similitudine sua a se ipsa elicita ut in imagine naturali et propria sui ipsius unitatem, quae est eius entitas».

Cusa's four unities²; and only after twenty years Andrea Fiamma finally provided solid and undeniable arguments about Proclus' influence, through the mediation of Dietrich of Freiberg and Eimerich van den Velde³.

If the origin was scarcely considered, even less attention was paid to the systematic development of the doctrine. Flasch remarked that Cusa talked about *mens ipsa* in the sole *De coniecturis* without ever mentioning it again later; Hans Gerhard Senger quickly dismissed the doctrine in 2014, saying that it was «something enigmatic within the entire Cusa's work»; finally, in 2018, Enrico Peroli endorsed these two positions in his commentary on the text⁴. These three positions about the *mens ipsa* share a common method, which however appears to be problematic: all the three scholars, indeed, believe that, if Cusa did not talk *expressis verbis* about a concept, then he must have dismissed it. In other words, a concept is considered to be dismissed when there is no explicit textual evidence which proves its presence. However, such a method does not consider whether a development of the concept – or even of its linguistic formulation – is present in the works of a philosopher; in addition, they did not effectively consider whether Cusa did not really mention *mens ipsa* anymore.

2. Objections

There are three objections to list against this method, which is common to Flasch, Senger and Peroli. Firstly, (§1) we must observe that Flasch himself mitigated his assessment, by remarking in the same page that «there are some echoes, especially in *De coniecturis* II, 14, and in *De quaerendo Deum*, n. 45,

² K. Flasch, *Niccolò Cusano. Lezioni introduttive a un'analisi genetica del suo pensiero*, transl. T. Cavallo, Nino Aragno, Torino 2010 [1998¹], p. 167: «Tale teoria asserisce che è la *mens ipsa*, ovvero lo spirito, a costituire Dio e l'intero ordine consequenziale dell'universo. Io non sono riuscito a rintracciare questa tesi in Proclo. Cusano l'ha chiaramente formulata una volta e in un luogo centrale, pur senza svilupparla ulteriormente; infatti dopo il *De coniecturis* non è più tornato su questa teoria».

³ A. Fiamma, *Nicola Cusano da Colonia a Roma (1425-1450). Università, politica e umanesimo nel giovane Cusano*, Aschendorff, Münster 2019, pp. 237-249.

⁴ K. Flasch, *Niccolò Cusano*, cit., p. 167. H.G. Senger, «Funktion und Bedeutung des Quaternars bei Cusanus», in R. Brandt (ed.), *Die Macht des Vierten. Über eine Ordnung der europäischen Kultur*, Felix Meiner, Hamburg 2014, pp. 121-149: 126 (the translation is mine); E. Peroli, Commentary on *De coniecturis*, in N. Cusano, *Opere filosofiche, teologiche e matematiche*, Bompiani, Milano 2018, p. 2354, fn. 40.

4-6»⁵: with the term ‘echoes’ Flasch dodges a more detailed genetic analysis; however, even if they were simple echoes, it would have been necessary to understand their development and their presence. Secondly, (§2) the limitation of the *mens ipsa* to 1442 – or to 1445 with *De quaerendo Deum* – begins to come apart when we look at the mature works. In 2019 Fiamma talked about the plurality of intelligible species within the mind, and he explored the cases of *De mente* and *De beryllo*⁶ – a group of texts of which we can now list some remarks.

First of all, (§2.1) no scholar considered the link between *mens ipsa* and theory of mind, as it is formulated in *De mente* III – thus ignoring even the similarity of the title with the name of the doctrine. We must recall that in this works Cusa defined *mens divina* as «the All-encompassing Unity of the [respective] true nature of [all] things», «Infinite Mind», «Exemplar of our minds»⁷. The divine mind guarantees the correspondence of the essence of the things to the consideration of the things themselves: the ‘truth’ (the transcendental *verum*) depends on the fact that, at God’s eyes the essences correspond to God’s thought. In this way, the ontological containment and the gnoseological function overlap, as Cusa immediately notes: «The Divine Mind’s Conceiving is a producing of things. [...] If the Divine Mind is Absolute Being itself, then its Conceiving is the creating of beings»⁸.

Secondly, (§2.2) the relation between divine mind and human mind is considered in *De mente* in the same way it was considered in *De coniecturis*. Human mind is an assimilation and an image of the divine exemplar and – most important – this assimilation works through mathematics, *i.e.* with proportions: «knowledge comes about on the basis of likeness»⁹. One may note that the object of inquiry in *De coniecturis* was the *Quaternar*, while in *De mente* there is no mention of it. This notwithstanding, in the very beginning of the exposition of *De*

⁵ K. Flasch, *Niccolò Cusano*, cit., p. 167, fn. 266: «esistono comunque degli echi, in particolare in *De coniecturis* II, 14 e in *De quaerendo Deum*, n. 45, 4-6» (the translation is mine).

⁶ A. Fiamma, *Nicola Cusano da Colonia a Roma*, cit., pp. 249 sgg.

⁷ Nicholai de Cusa *De mente*, III, 72 (ed. Hopkins, p. 543): «Idiota: Scis, quomodo simplicitas divina omnium rerum est complicativa. Mens est huius complicantis simplicitatis imago. Unde si hanc divinam simplicitatem infinitam mentem vocitaveris, erit ipsa nostrae mentis exemplar».

⁸ *Ibidem*: «Conceptio divinae mentis est rerum productio; conceptio nostrae mentis est rerum notio. Si mens divina est absoluta entitas, tunc eius conceptio est entium creatio, et nostrae mentis conceptio est entium assimilatio».

⁹ *Ibidem*: «Si omnia sunt in mente divina ut in sua praecisa et propria veritate, omnia sunt in mente nostra ut in imagine seu similitudine propriae veritatis, hoc est notionaliter; similitudine enim fit cognitio».

coniecturis Cusa observed that «by means of a numerical likeness of itself that is elicited from it itself the mind contemplates, as by means of a natural and proper image [of itself], its own oneness, which is its being»¹⁰. The similarity between the two argumentations is so clear that, with Cusa's words, «*clamitat in plateis*».

Thirdly, (§2.3) we should take into consideration the excerpt of *De mente*, III, 77, where Cusa exposed his theory of *iudicium*, as this argument concerns also the *mens ipsa*. Cusa remarks that the mind could know nothing if it had not a certain faculty of judgment which were almost innate. Cusa does not mean the platonic ideas, but rather Aristotle's categorial divisions, *i.e.* those categories which Cusa himself often employs in other treatises: in *De dato patris luminum*, for example, these categories describe both the structure of human mind and the ontological structure of the universe (with Heidegger's words, the *Durchschnittlichkeit*). We will later consider this division.

The third objection (§3) against the overmentioned method is based on the method itself. Flasch and Senger did not find textual presence of the *mens ipsa* and the *Quaternar* after *De coniecturis*. One, however, can consider the case of *De mente*, III, 74, to observe that Cusa structures the flow God-Mind-Plurality in a way that is similar to the *Quaternar*: each step of this flow is contained by the previous step, and it contains the following ones, like in a chain of Chinese boxes¹¹.

There is one last objection (§4), coming from *De venatione sapientiae*, chapter 17, which is the strongest argument against the position above-mentioned. In this place Cusa introduces a quotation from Proclus, according to which the soul, the intelligence and God contemplate the totality of things but each in its respective way¹². The list of these ways is significant: «in deo Deus, in intellectu intellectus, in sensu sensus, in anima animaliter». If we compare these words with the chapter on *Quaternar* and *mens ipsa* from *De coniecturis* I, 4, we can appreciate their close similarity:

¹⁰ Nicholai de Cusa *De coniecturis*, I, 4, 12 (ed. Hopkins, p. 168).

¹¹ Nicholai de Cusa *De mente*, III, 74: «Sicut enim deus est complicationum complicatio, sic mens, quae est dei imago, est imago complicationis complicationum. Post imagines sunt pluralitates rerum divinam complicationem explicantes».

¹² Nicholai de Cusa *De venatione sapientiae*, XVII, 49: «Nam bonitas, magnitudo, veritas et omnia illa decem in omnibus sunt omnia: in deo deus, in intellectu intellectus, in sensu sensus. Si igitur, quae in deo deus, in intellectu intellectus et in omnibus omnia, utique omnia in intellectu intellectus sunt».

Now, in God all things are God; in an intelligence all things are intellect; in a soul all things are soul; in a body all things are body. This claim is none other than the claim that mind embraces all things either (1) divinely or (2) intellectually or (3) as does a soul or (4) as does a body¹³.

In addition, in *De venatione* 17 Cusa recalls also the assimilation, the function of the mathematic proportion, the role of the *exemplar* and the ontological unification: God is «omnia intellectualiter ambiens»; likewise, in *De coniecturis* the *mens ipsa* encompassed and grasped everything. Enrico Peroli, who limited the concept of *mens ipsa* in the commentary on *De coniecturis*, now recalls it to the commentary on *De venatione sapientiae* and frequently proposes the comparison with *De coniecturis* IV as a genetic source¹⁴. For these reasons, we cannot limit the presence of the *mens ipsa* to the sole *De coniecturis*.

Summing up, I believe these arguments provide a clear overview of the problematic method shared by Flasch, Senger and Peroli. On the contrary, I believe that the presence of the *mens ipsa* can be detected not only in *De quaerendo Deum* (1445), but also in *De mente* (1450), in *De beryllo* (1458) and in *De venatione sapientiae* (1463). We are all called to explore and verify this long line, And possibly to understand its development.

3. Research questions

In his commentary on *De coniecturis* Enrico Peroli provides two useful questions about the doctrine of the *mens ipsa* which can guide our present analysis¹⁵. The questions can be synthetized in this way:

RQ1: How do we have to understand this concept? Is it an absolute mind, a sort of *Geist*, as Flasch and Mojsisch suggested? Or rather is it a description of the human mind, as Kny recently proposed¹⁶?

13 Nicholai de Cusa *De coniecturis*, I, 4, 15 (ed. Hopkins, p. 169): «Omnia autem in deo Deus, in intelligentia intellectus, in anima anima, in corpore corpus. Quod autem non est aliud quam mentem omnia complecti vel divine vel intellectualiter vel animaliter aut corporaliter».

14 E. Peroli, Commentary on *De venatione sapientiae*, in N. Cusano, *Opere*, cit., p. 2895, fn. 196-204.

15 Ivi, p. 2354.

16 K. Flasch, *Niccolò Cusano*, cit., p. 167; C. Kny, *Kreative, asymptotische Assimilation: menschliche Erkenntnis bei Nicolaus Cusanus*, Aschendorff, Münster 2018, pp. 159-164, in part. p. 161: «Die vier Einheiten wären dann in der Tat nur eine Verobjektivierung epistemologischer Verhältnisse in der *mens humana* ohne gesicherten ontologischen Gehalt».

RQ2: How do we have to understand the four unities of the *Quaternar*? Are they ‘principles of interpretation of the world’, *i.e.* phenomenological structures of the mind, as Santinello suggested? Or rather are they ontological structures, which first create the universe and secondly the mind, as Koch and Bonetti proposed¹⁷?

Peroli lists these interpretations but he offers neither criticisms nor approvals of them, nor even further textual references which may help find a solution.

4. Discussion of RQ2

In this context, we can provide some remarks which may contribute fixing a new and more precise reading of those paragraphs. First, it is important to underline that the two interpretations of RQ2 are equally valid: namely, both Santinello’s idea of *mens ipsa* as a phenomenological structure, and Koch’s idea of *mens ipsa* as ontological division. The distinction of these two perspectives is the improper result of a contemporary method of investigation, which reflects today’s philosophical paradigms (like ‘phenomenology’) upon an issue that requires to be considered *iuxta propria principia* – *i.e.* with the categories of the Neoplatonic-Proclian tradition. For this reason, we do believe that both these readings are truly based on the texts, at least before 1450. The crucial point is to understand how they were developed by Cusa within the texts.

The structure of *De mente* is firstly gnoseological. Cusa explores the human, individual mind and its function of soul of a body (*e.g.* in *De mente* II, 57)¹⁸. The human mind is *imago Dei* and it works as a determinate reflection of the *mens ipsa*, as it had been discussed in *De coniecturis*. Finally, the dialogue is grounded on a mathematical point of view, as the human sight contemplates the world like a compass with different opening degrees. These excerpts represent the cornerstone of Santinello’s reading.

On the other side, *De mente* III clearly portrays the correspondence of thought and ontological production in God’s mind. Something similar is proposed in *De dato patris luminum* § 101, where we find good arguments for the ‘ontological’

¹⁷ J. Koch, *Die ars coniecturalis des Nikolaus von Kues*, Westdeutscher Verlag, Köln 1956, pp. 16-20; A. Bonetti, *La ricerca metafisica nel pensiero di Nicolò Cusano*, Paideia, Brescia 1973, p. 69; G. Santinello, *Introduzione a Cusano*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1987², pp. 61-62.

¹⁸ This identification is supported also by K. Flasch, *Niccolò Cusano*, *cit.*, p. 157, who mentions *De coniecturis* but adds in footnote the reference to *De mente* («secondo il *De coniecturis* le categorie sono invece partizioni create dalla mente»).

interpretation. The being emanates from the First principle and it generates the universe according to a categorial division:

This being is received in a descending manner—viz., quantifiedly, qualifiedly, relationally, actively, passively, situationally, possessingly, spatially, and temporally. For simple oneness is received in nine modes, so that in this way all things are numbered by the number ten¹⁹.

This articulation in ten steps is a clear replication of the second unity of the *Quaternar*, from *De coniecturis* – and Cusa immediately identifies it with the *intellectus* (§ 102). However, the point of view here is no more gnoseological, but rather ontological: Cusa is not exploring how the mind knows, but rather how the universe is structured when coming out from the divine unity.

At first glance, we may think we are stuck between Scylla and Charybdis, but we can count on some concepts that enlighten this issue. Some years ago, Andrea Fiamma studied the flow of the two *Quaternar* (gnoseological and ontological) in Dietrich of Freiberg and he reached significant conclusions: «the two *Quaternars* identify the same four-party division of the same flow of beings, but one time according to the intellect, another time according to the Nature. They are two ‘*facies*’ of the same coin»²⁰. In other words, there is no proper difference between gnoseological and ontological reading, as they are linked with one another, even though they focus on different aspects of the same thing.

Likewise, Cusa starts the discussion about the *mens ipsa* talking about ontological containment and gnoseological comprehension: ‘encompassing’ and ‘grasping’ go hand in hand. These remarks permit to better understand the theory of *iudicium concreatum* in *De mente*, which is clearly a case of overlapping between ontological and gnoseological levels: human knowledge depends on sense, but the structure of human mind, as for the constitution of *iudicia*, must be innate [*concreata*]. How can we explain this innatism? The absolute value of the *iudicium* comes from the real essence of the categorial divisions: the judgment is innate because it mirrors a division that is within the reality [*Ur-teilung*].

It is worth recalling the main points of this argumentation, in order to

¹⁹ Nicholai de Cusa *De dato patris luminum*, 101: «Forma substantialis universaliter dat esse substantiale. Hoc esse descensive recipitur, scilicet quantificative, qualificative, respective, active, passive, situationaliter, habitualiter, localiter et temporaliter. Unitas enim simplex novem modis recipitur, ut sic denario omnia numerentur».

²⁰ A. Fiamma, *Nicola Cusano da Colonia a Roma*, cit., p. 243.

gather useful conclusions. Firstly, the theory of *mens ipsa* is present also after *De coniecturis*. This presence is proved on textual evidence and it derives from Proclian sources²¹. We can explore its development, its changing and the lexical variations, but we cannot judge it as enigmatic. Secondly, the theory of *mens ipsa* can be considered from two points of view, both referring to the definition provided in *De coniecturis* I, 4. The categories of the absolute mind represent an ontological division of the reality, as expressly stated in *De dato patris luminum*; but they also represent unifying principles of the subjective knowledge, according to *De mente*. This correspondence descends from a Neoplatonic tendency, namely to analyse the reality with structures of the human mind: according to Proclus' *Theologia platonica*, the ontological emanation from the One is the intellectual order [*nòera tàxis*]²².

5. Discussion of RQ1

We still have to consider the RQ1 about the *mens ipsa*: is it really a *Geistmetaphysik* as suggested by Flasch some years ago? Flasch timidly proposed that hypothesis, but its verification has still to be done: «I just mention this 'open' excerpt, and I recall that, where in *De coniecturis* he talks about *mens* or *intellectus*, it has still to be verified if the author means 'our spirit' or 'the spirit in itself'»²³. On the opposite side, Christian Kny suggested to interpretate the four unities as an «epistemological self-explication» of the human knowledge; therefore, they should be referred to the human mind, not to the ontological dependency from the First Principle²⁴. If we agree with Kny, we then have to explain the meaning of other arguments that are closely related to the *mens ipsa*: what about the transcendentals *entitas-unitas-onitas* in the first Unity? What about the identification of the first unity with God? What about the doctrine of the form in *De dato patris luminum*²⁵? But, above all, we may wonder: in which place of *De coniecturis* did Cusa identify the *mens ipsa* with the *mens humana*? Therefore, this identification is problematic even on textual basis.

²¹ E. Peroli, Commentary on *De venatione sapientiae*, in N. Cusano, *Opere*, cit., p. 2895, fn. 197-198.

²² Proclus, *Platonica theologia*, II, 12 (ed. Abbate, Bompiani, Milano 2019, p. 285).

²³ K. Flasch, *Niccolò Cusano*, cit., p. 168.

²⁴ C. Kny, *Kreative, asymptotische Assimilation*, cit., p. 160.

²⁵ A. Fiamma, *Nicola Cusano da Colonia a Roma*, cit., pp. 151-174.

In conclusion, it can be said that the *mens ipsa* and the four unities of the *Quaternar* represent something wider and superior – both extensively and intensively – than the simple functions of human mind, without thereby turning Cusa into a forerunner of German idealism. The human minds are no more than explications, particular reflections, of the original absolute mind of the Principle, whose thinking corresponds to the creation of the things. This correspondence, that descends from the Neoplatonic tradition, permits to read the *mens ipsa* as a description of the structure of the universe and, at the same time, of the structure of the human minds.