

María Jesús Soto-Bruna*

Knowing as Interpretation in Nicholas of Cusa

Conhecer como interpretação em Nicolau de Cusa

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta algumas teses iniciais de um estudo mais amplo sobre a metafísica do conhecimento de Nicolau de Cusa. Começa por citar um texto de maturidade do Cusano no qual: a) o intelecto é caracterizado como primeiro; b) o conhecimento é emparelhado com a noção de manifestação; e c) faz-se notar que o auto-conhecimento conduz ao conhecimento do Absoluto criador. A citação levar-nos-á à noção de conhecimento como interpretação das coisas, na medida em que elas adquirem significado na mente humana.

Palavras-chave: Nicolau de Cusa; conhecimento; interpretação; manifestação.

Abstract

This paper presents some initial theses of a wider study on Nicolas of Cusa's metaphysics of knowledge. It begins by quoting a text of maturity of the Cusan in which: a) the intellect is characterized as the first; b) knowledge is paired with the notion of manifestation; and c) it is noticed that self-knowledge leads to the knowledge of the Absolute creator. The quotation will lead us, then, to a notion of knowledge as interpretation of things, insofar as they acquire meaning in the human mind.

Keywords: Nicholas of Cusa; knowledge; interpretation; manifestation.

* Full Professor of Medieval Philosophy, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Navarra, Edificio Ismael Sánchez Bella, 31009 Pamplona, Spain; mjsoto@unav.es.

1. Introduction

You must first of all take cognizance of the fact that the First Beginning is singular; and according to Anaxagoras it is called intellect (Plato, *Phaedo*, 97b ss; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I, 984b, 15-18). From Intellect all things come into existence in order for Intellect to manifest itself; for it delights in manifesting and communicating the light of its own intelligence (Proclus, *Platonic Theology* V, 12). Accordingly, because the Creator-Intellect makes itself the goal of its own works in order for its glory to be manifested, it creates cognizing substances that are capable of beholding its reality [*veritas*]. And the Creator offers itself to these substances in the manner in which they are able to apprehend it as visible. This is the first point to know. In it, all that remains to be said is contained in an enfolded way¹.

These are the words of Nicholas of Cusa, written in 1458 in *De Beryllo*, a work that brings together practically all the topics found in his previous thought. In 1450, he finished the dialogues of *The Idiot*, the most relevant of which for our topic is *The Layman on Mind*; and in 1453, he finished *The Vision of God*. In the former, Cusa deals with the power of the human mind to recreate the world within itself, in such a way that it resembles the creator insofar as it is capable of enfolding within itself the world of the explications or similarities of the divine exemplars. In other words, the truth of things – which would be inaccessible in its divine origin – shines and is illuminated in and through human knowledge. In *The Vision of God*, Cusa deals with two issues. On the one hand, he addresses the relationship between seeing and creating in the Absolute. On the other, he discusses the being of human finitude as seen by the Absolute, which, in turn, can be contemplated by the former through the intellectual soul.

This discussion will deal with the aforementioned issues, focusing on three aspects: 1) the understanding of intellection as self-knowledge and reference to the Absolute; 2) drawing attention to the notion of mind as living image, capable of recreating the world within itself; 3) showing how Nicholas of Cusa inaugurates a new theory of knowledge which, in spite of sometimes being interpreted as prefiguring Kantianism, is not exactly like that, even though it commences a new way of understanding knowledge in which primacy is given to the subject and not to reality in itself – thus establishing a certain distance from the previous thinking on this subject.

¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Beryllo* 4. In this paper, I will use Hopkins's English translation of Cusa's works: J. Hopkins, *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*, Bannig, Minneapolis 2001.

2. Intellection as Self-knowledge and Knowledge of the Absolute

According to Nicholas of Cusa, when the intellectual soul scrutinizes within itself, it contemplates God and all things. This is stated in his work *On the Pursuit of Wisdom*:

Hence, since knowledge is assimilation, the intellect finds all things to be within itself as in a mirror that is alive with an intellectual life. When the intellect looks within itself, it sees in itself all the assimilated things. And this assimilation is a living image of the Creator and of all things².

In light of this doctrine, Nicholas of Cusa links the knowledge of things with the self-knowledge of the soul as image of God. Accordingly, in this sense, it constitutes «a new way of understanding knowledge»³.

By knowing things by assimilating them into itself, the soul recognizes itself as a living and intellectual image of the creator:

But since the intellect is a living image of God, who is not *other* than anything: when the intellect enters into itself and knows that it is such an image, it observes within itself what kind of thing its own Exemplar is⁴.

In the previous passage, the metaphor of the mirror operates as a logical nexus between the soul's self-knowledge, the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of the world: the soul resembles God because it is a living mirror. As a mirror, the soul is able to contemplate God within itself and get to know itself as his image. The soul can then know the world within itself, just as all things are enfolded within the Absolute.

As "living image", the soul has the capacity to recreate in itself all things that, as exemplars, are within the divine intellect or Logos. Accordingly, the soul is also called the "measure" of things. As Cusa explains in *De Beryllo*: «Hence, man finds in himself, as in a measuring scale, all created things»⁵. Here, the idea of measure implies that, by participating in the divine power, the human mind assimilates in itself all things to notionally assimilate them. This amounts to dis-

² Nicholas of Cusa, *De venatione sapientiae* XVII, 50.

³ A. L. González, «La doctrina de Nicolás de Cusa sobre la mente. Hacia una nueva gnoseología», *Studia Philologica Valentina*, 10 (2007) 1.

⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *De venatione sapientiae* XVII, 50.

⁵ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Beryllo* 6.

covering their intelligibility and interpreting their meaning in its own intellect. Situated between medieval and modern times, we can affirm that for Cusa the human being measures everything other than itself; however, ultimately, the unity of measure is not in it (the human), but in the Absolute. The notion of mirror employed by Nicholas of Cusa in this regard does not imply that human knowledge is just a reflection, but rather – as we will see – it is living image.

Certainly, from the aforementioned simile of the mirror, it may seem that either the creature is reduced to a mere reflection without entity, so that God created an unintelligible world; or else that the Absolute would remain immanent in the form reflected on it; which – as Cusa explains – would be as if by seeing itself in the Absolute, the creature “would give back” to the creator what He already is.

From the beginning, Nicholas of Cusa’s position in this regard is clear: the world is created *imago representationis*, because it refers, as an image (*Bild*), to the creator. When creating, God does not have any other exemplar (*Urbild*) but Himself. Because of this, the whole world is created according to the divine likeness (*ad Dei similitudinem*). In more proper terms, material creation is a footprint of God. Only the spiritual creature possesses an authentic likeness to the creator (*creatoris similitudo*). Based on this, it is said that the human being is an *imago imitationis creata*⁶ – a formulation that Nicholas himself employs in *De sapientia*.

All the above does not mean that such a “reflected image” (or of “representation”) – recently referred to as characterization of the finite being from the metaphysical idea of manifestation – makes the creature’s realm a mere copy, in the style of the strictest Platonism⁷. Instead, what it means is the possibility of contemplating how entities can make present their presence in the Absolute’s face, thanks to the power of the human mind. This is the mission of human knowledge.

⁶ This in contrast with the Logos, the Son, who is *imago aequalitatis genita Patris*. Cfr. A. L. González, «La doctrina...», cit., pp. 1-24. In my opinion, this topic is well studied in C. D’Amico, «Nicolás de Cusa, ‘De Mente’: la profundización de la doctrina del hombre-imagen», *Patristica et Medievalia* XII (1991) 53-68. From the same autor, C. D’Amico, «Nicolás de Cusa, ‘De Sapientia’: un nuevo concepto de sabiduría a la luz de la tradición medieval», *Patristica et Medievalia* XIII (1992) 107-120. This topic has also been adressed in A. Kijewska, «De ludo globi. The Way of Ascension towards God and the Way of the Self-Knowledge», in J. M. Machetta – C. D’Amico (eds.), *El problema del conocimiento en Nicolás de Cusa: genealogía y proyección*, Ed. Biblos, Buenos Aires 2005, pp. 157-164.

⁷ Cfr. Plato, *Timaeus* 30c; where he declares that the universe of the multiplicity has been constituted as a copy of «the most beautiful of intelligible beings». Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, tr. R. Waterfield, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008.

Volkman-Schluck defines this in very concrete terms. Thus, when talking about the symbolic representation of the world in Nicholas of Cusa, he claims: «from the beginning is necessary to be certain that *imago* does not signify copy (*Abbild*) of an original (*Urbild*), but visible expression of what is invisible»⁸. Here, expressing, before copying, means to imitate and to reproduce – to make visible – the essential invisibility of the Absolute. This is a crucial issue for our topic: «the essential invisibility of the Absolute and the possibility of its visibility are two points on which the articulation of God’s transcendence and his immanence in all that is created pivots»⁹. In this sense, knowing is not making copies of reality, but creative activity of the spirit. Moreover, regarding the created being or the finitude, to obtain the real existence of the creature it is not enough for God’s sight to be present, but to this, it must be added the sight of creatures, «because a thing exists insofar as You see it, and it would not exist actually unless it saw You»¹⁰. Thus, the divine presence in the simile of the mirror alludes to nothing other than a vision of the truth of the being itself of the finite intellect.

In what follows, the paper will advance further into the notion of mind as a living image and its consequences for the conception of knowledge.

3. The mind as a living image

For Nicholas of Cusa, the human mind is an image of God, but this does not imply that it exists as some sort of copy that is limited to reflecting the world. By being an image, the human mind is capable of manifesting the content of the divine Logos. But, above all, it is a “living image” that imitates the Absolute by “recreating” what is created. This means that, when knowing, the human mind configures or recreates a notion of the things of the world. Only then do things acquire an intelligible meaning for the human mind. This is true, indeed, even when things are already intelligible by the act of creation.

Accordingly, the action of the human mind is assimilative or notional, but not intentional in the classic sense, because it sees and knows the entities within

⁸ K. H. Volkman-Schluck, *Nikolaus Cusanus. Die Philosophie im Übergang vom Mittelalter zur Neuzeit*, Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1984, p. 25.

⁹ A. L. González, «Creador y creatura en el *De Visione Dei* de Nicolás de Cusa», in G. Aranda, C. Basevi, and J. Chapa (eds.), *Biblia, exégesis y cultura. Estudios en honor del prof. D. José María Casciaro*, Eunsa, Pamplona 1994, p. 550.

¹⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, *De visione Dei* 12, 48.

itself when noticing its own nature of image. It could be affirmed that the mind “produces” its own activity, but not reality. Certainly, the mind «is an active principle of knowing, but a principle whose activity falls on itself and not on what is real»¹¹.

Without a doubt, material creation is manifestation or theophany. However, as we have read, human knowing, additionally, «finds all things to be within itself as in a mirror that is alive with an intellectual life. When the intellect looks within itself, it sees in itself all the assimilated things»¹². Its act of knowing consists of configuring the created things, by measuring them. The mind reproduces in itself what it itself is not – the real – which, in turn, begins to exist again, not as real, but as a species, as a kind of *complicatio intentionalis*. This means that it can refer to the creator, through the human intellect. We are looking at an idea of *mens* as *mensura* that rethinks the classical idea of intentionality.

But, nonetheless, the human mind never loses its character of dependency with respect to the origin because its function culminates in making visible the essential invisibility of the Absolute. Moreover, what is real cannot be ever reduced to thought. What is real in the human mind is the real as thought, recreated, configured, which refers to the exemplar present in the divine mind. In this sense, it is possible to talk about a “species” that enfolds the human mind to access the Absolute.

In reality, the human mind is not a kind of *explicatio* of the divine (as the world can be), but properly speaking it is an image «of the Eternal Enfolding»¹³:

All things are present in God, but in God they are exemplars of things; all things are present in our mind, but in our mind they are likeness of things.

Just as God is Absolute Being itself that is Enfolding of all beings, so our mind is an image of that Infinite Being itself – an image that is the enfolding of all [other] images [of God]. [...] so that mind is both an image of God and an exemplar for all the images-of-God that are [ontologically] subsequent to it. Hence, to the extent that all things subsequent to the simplicity of mind partake of mind, to that extent they also partake of the image of God. Thus, mind, in and of itself, is an image of God; and all things subsequent to mind [are an image of God] only by way of mind¹⁴.

¹¹ D. Gamarra, «*Mens est viva mesura*. Nicolás de Cusa y el acto intelectual», *Anuario Filosófico*, 28 (1995) 589. Cfr. M. J. Soto-Bruna, *El Renacimiento: De Nicolás de Cusa a Giordano Bruno. Razón heroica y libertad*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2020.

¹² Nicholas of Cusa, *De venatione sapientiae* XVII, 50.

¹³ Nicholas of Cusa, *De mente* IV, 74.

¹⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *De mente* III, 73.

Nicholas of Cusa can say, then, that the mind is a finite art, an image of the infinite art. And, insofar as it recreates things when getting to know them, it can be claimed that its assimilation of the things of the world is not intentional in the classical sense of the term because the human mind recreates the world within itself. This is not a representation in the Kantian style, as could have been thought by some authors of the Neo-Kantian School of Marburg (for instance, this is the case with Ernst Cassirer's volumes about *The Problem of Knowledge*, whose first volume begins precisely with Nicholas of Cusa, in the framework of a Renaissance of the problem of knowledge¹⁵). Indeed, Cusa's idea of recreation means, properly speaking, illumination of the world in such a way that the human being can notice that it makes reference to the divine. In the foregoing sense, it can be affirmed that one of the principles that govern the thought of Nicholas of Cusa is the idea of the mind as an image of the divine.

As Ángel Luis González wrote, «man orders the created images, just as the Absolute created the entities»; «God is an entitative creator, man is a notional creator. The human mind, a noble image of God, partakes according to its possibilities, of the fecundity of the creative nature, inasmuch as it [the human mind] extracts from itself, as image of the omnipotent form, rational entities, in the likeness of real entities»¹⁶. In this sense, to know is to measure. It is not to create, but instead to cognitively recreate, as Álvarez Gómez pointed out in *Der Mensch Schoepfer seiner Welt*. The perfect act of knowing is realized only in God. The world is said by God, and this saying is constitutive. However, the world is also said by the human being, but this is a notional saying that represents or refers to the divine saying¹⁷ because the mind is an image of the divine enfolding¹⁸. Ultimately, things are found within the divine Logos in their proper truth, and

¹⁵ E. Cassirer, *El problema del conocimiento en la filosofía y en las ciencias modernas*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Ciudad de México 1906: «In the first writings of this thinker, we see how, at first glance, referring to each other and entwined in a negative way, there appear the concept of God [topic that Cassirer considers central in Cusa's philosophy] and the concept of knowledge. By denying and abolishing progressively all proper determinability of knowledge and of its finite object, we arrive through this to being and to the determination of the content of the absolute» p. 65. «The Middle Ages considered the object of supreme knowledge as transcendent... The modern period begins by inverting the conception of the Middle Ages... The object towards which he directs his gaze is immanent: the consciousness» p. 71.

¹⁶ A. L. González, «La doctrina...», cit., p. 9.

¹⁷ Cfr. D. Gamarra, «*Mens est...*», cit., p.595.

¹⁸ Cfr. Nicholas of Cusa, *De mente* IV, 74.

in the human mind, according to similarity and in the way of a meaningful and intelligible notion.

As Claudia D'Amico has expressed, in Nicholas of Cusa one cannot talk any more about truth as the *adaequatio intellectus ad rem*¹⁹. Rather, in the context of the inaccessibility of the Absolute and the idea of *mens as mensura*, there appears another one of the major principles of Cusa's thought, that is, the principle of the *docta ignorantia*. Within the topic we are dealing with, this principle implies that if the inaccessibility of the original Truth sets the limits of the human knowledge, then its depiction as a "measure" allows for it to have in its mind the *explicata dei*, to which it gives their meaning. In this way, it makes visible – to the extent of the human measure – the essential invisibility of God himself. Because of this, we will always have a progressive apprehension of the real, that is conjectural most of the time.

«In the framework of Cusa's thought, the fundamental question remains oriented towards the entity, and not towards the subject in the modern sense»²⁰, even though this subject is understood as a living image where the fundamental question regarding knowledge is resolved. In this sense, the novelty here consists in the fact that this account seeks the answer for ontic reality in the context of the human mind. In effect, the *mens* is not the foundation of what is real, but it is what gives reality of meaning to things. It creates *similitudines similitudinum divini intellectus*²¹.

In the dialogue on the mind, Nicholas of Cusa explains very well that the mind possesses a power or potency that, even when it needs the stimulus of the senses, «by virtue of being the image of the Absolute Enfolding [Being], which is the Infinite Mind, [it] has the power by which it can assimilate itself to all unfoldings»²². This is what it means to be an image of the infinite simplicity that enfolds all things. Because of this, Cusa continues:

We learn that the mind is that power which, when stimulated, can assimilate itself to every form and can make concepts of all things, even though, [initially], it lacks all conceptual form. [The situation is] similar, in a certain way, to unimpaired sight when it is darkness – sight that never was in the presence of light. This sight lacks any actual concept of visible objects; but when it

¹⁹ C. D'Amico, «Nicolás de Cusa 'De Mente' ...», cit., p. 54.

²⁰ C. D'Amico, «Nicolás de Cusa 'De Mente' ...», cit. p. 60.

²¹ Cf. *De Beryllo* IV.

²² Nicholas of Cusa, *De mente* IV, 75.

comes into the light and is stimulated, it assimilates itself to what is visible, so that it makes a concept [thereof]²³.

To conclude, then, it can be maintained that the idea of interpretation as a form of knowledge in Nicholas of Cusa reunites the diverse interpretations of the mind as a measure.

²³ Nicholas of Cusa, *De mente* VI, 78.