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The Hunt for Wisdom as a Spiritual Exercise. Transcendental-Anagogical Interpretation of Nicholas Cusanus's Philosophy

SUMMARY

Nicholas Cusanus (1401-1464) is one of the most interesting figures in the history of European philosophy, or even in the history of Europe itself, due to his engagement in many political and ecclesiastical activities that were essential to the general sociopolitical landscape of Western civilization. He investigated some of the most important problems of medieval philosophy and endowed them with a peculiar philosophical "savour" that inspired many later thinkers (e.g. Ernst Cassirer, Carl Gustav Jung, Karl Jaspers, Hans-Georg Gadamer). There is a plenitude of external contexts and tensions which we have to consider in order to understand Cusanus's writings, but – more importantly – there is a plenitude of contexts and tensions that are internal to those writings, e.g. terminological instability, variety of concepts and diverse ways of approaching philosophical and theological problems. This dissertation is an attempt to develop a mode of interpretation of Cusanus's philosophy by finding its proper intellectual context, working out a general way of reading his texts, and solving some interpretative problems.

The most fundamental problem that might be called a broad philosophical background of Cusanus's intellectual activity is a problem of "Christian philosophy", or more precisely, the relation between Christianity and philosophy. An apparent tension between human wisdom and the mystery of Christ has been an object of investigation by many great thinkers throughout the ages, since Paul the Apostle, Justin the Martyr, Tertullian and Augustine of Hippo to this day. One of the signs of this tension is a discussion that was triggered in the 20th century among the historians of philosophy by two French scholars, Émile Bréhier and Étienne Gilson. The former investigated a problem whether in the history of philosophy there is something that can be called "a Christian philosophy", and he stated that there is not. The latter, on the other hand, argued against this view by showing novelties and peculiarities of Christian thought and by trying to prove the profound intellectual independence of the Christians from the Pagan tradition. Regardless of the validity of each of these views, it is clear that this is a great problem that can be analyzed in relation to any of the Christian thinkers – and to Cusanus as well. Is he more of a philosopher, or more of a Christian? Is there a conflict between the two? Many great scholars already showed that Cusanus's philosophy is deeply influenced both by the Greek tradition (e.g. Aristotle, Plato, Pythagoreans, Neo-Platonists) and by the Holy Scripture and the Christian thinkers (e.g. Augustine of Hippo, Dionysius the Areopagite, Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas). The dissertation is an attempt to find an explanation of how these two traditions meet in Cusanus writings.

In the first chapter, I outline Cusanus's metaphilosophical background by pointing towards some styles of thinking and traditions that were present among the intellectuals in his times (e.g. a Socratic tradition, an Aristotelian tradition, a tradition of mysticism). The purpose of this chapter is to show how Cusanus understands his own works, what his goal is and what the crucial conceptual tensions are (e.g. wisdom – knowledge, love – vision, intellect – reason, practical – theoretical). In this chapter, I try to show that Cusanus's philosophy is a *sui generis* spiritual exercise that serves a sapiential and anagogical goal, i.e. to move one's mind towards a loving and contemplative vision of God.

In the second chapter, I focus on some names of God, investigated by Cusanus (e.g. *maximum-minimum*, *non aliud*, *possest*, *posse ipsum*), and try to develop a coherent way of understanding their role in Cusanus's philosophy. The purpose of this chapter is to show that

(1) Cusanus tries to reveal God as the one principle of knowledge (i.e. human cognition) and being, and that (2) he makes certain assumptions concerning the teleology of cognition. The first conclusion is a transcendental part of Cusanus's philosophy and the second one is its anagogical part.

In the third chapter, I put the interpretation developed in the previous chapters at work and test it on more detailed, nonetheless very important, issues that emerge in Cusanus's epistemology, anthropology and Christology. The chapter starts with an analysis of the process of human cognition (according to Cusanus) and follows his train of thought in order to figure out how we can theoretically justify our anagogical movement towards God. The final part of this chapter deals with Cusanus's Christology as an essential part of his style of thinking in which Christ himself is a justification for our philosophizing; to put it even more strikingly, the person of Christ makes philosophy possible.

The dissertation is significant for research because it is a synthesized way of reading Cusanus and it serves explanatory purposes. Because it challenges several of important interpretations of Cusanus's thought and is debatable as well, it might be useful as a point of reference for future researchers. It is not an exhaustive analysis of all problems that can be found in Cusanus's writings, nor does it necessarily exclude every other way of reading Cusanus. It is only a proposal for elucidating his writings, endowed with some peculiar obscurities, by following a certain train of thought that might not always be expressed by Cusanus as clearly as it could be.