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Why does the intellect see wisdom? A Platonic figure of thought in *De sapientia* of Nicholas of Cusa

During a brief stay in Erfurt from May 29 to June 7, 1451, Nicholas of Cusa met Carthusian monk John de Indagine (Johannes Hagen).¹ Their communication was apparently very intense at that time, as it is evidenced by their correspondence² (however, the letters of Nicholas of Cusa to John de Indagine are now regarded as lost). The main reason for their meetings was evidently the reform of the Benedictine monastery of St. Peter and St. Paul in Erfurt, which according to proscriptions of the papal legate Nicholas of Cusa was listed among those which were to be reformed. As far as it is known, the superiors of the Erfurt Carthusian monastery of Salvatorberg (Jacob de Paradiso and John de Indagine) were commissioned to help Cardinal Cusanus in this reform with their advice and action.³

However, in a broader spiritual and devotional perspective, a different fact seems to me to be much more important, namely, that about a year before their meeting in Erfurt, two its participants wrote texts expressing their understanding of wisdom that could be obtained from the praxis of meditation and mystical contemplation. In case of Nicholas of Cusa, it is the famous dialogue *On Wisdom (De sapientia)* written in the Marches during the summer of 1450⁴, while in case of John de Indagine, the treatise *On Mystical Theology (De mystica theologia)*.⁵ Despite the fact that the views

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¹ MEUTHEN, Erich (Hg.): *Acta Cusana. Quellen zur Lebensgeschichte des Nikolaus von Kues*. Vol. 1. Hamburg: Meiner 1996, 925–926.

² MEUTHEN: *Acta Cusana*, vol. 1, 926.

³ MEUTHEN: *Acta Cusana*, vol. 1, 921.

⁴ FLASCH, Kurt: *Nikolaus von Kues: Geschichte einer Entwicklung. Vorlesungen zur Einführung in seine Philosophie*. 3. Aufl. Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann 2008, 251.

⁵ *Ioannes de Indagine: Tractatus de mystica theologia*, Ms. Paderborn, Erzbischöfliche Akademische Bibliothek, Cod. 118, fols. 162vb–173va. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Stephen Metzger, who kindly gave me a great opportunity to get acquainted with his studies of this text and his work on the preparation of its edition. Thanks to his efforts, this text was recently published: IOANNES DE INDAGINE: *Tractatus de mystica theologia*, ed. S. Metzger, in: HOFMEISTER PICH, Roberto/SPEER, Andreas (eds): *Contemplation and Philosophy: Scholastic and*

of both thinkers on the nature of wisdom and the way to reach it by means of contemplation and devotional praxis were completely different, their positions—compared to the views of the majority of their contemporaries—could be regarded almost to the same extent as sounded quite new and unusual.

The treatise of John de Indagine was examined by scholars to a much lesser extent than the dialogue *On Wisdom* of Nicholas of Cusa. However, it seems quite remarkable that the Erfurt Carthusian devotes a whole chapter of his work to the wisdom. In this paper, I would like to begin by discussing its most important points, and only then to examine the theory of Nicholas of Cusa and intertextual parallels related to it.

When John de Indagine met Nicholas of Cusa in Erfurt, he was not yet prior of the Carthusians (he held this position from 1457 to 1460). Thus, the motives of noticeably intensive contacts and communication between these two men are not quite clear. On the one hand, it may well be that John de Indagine, who also studied law (but had to leave the University of Erfurt after seven months at the Faculty of Law) and did not like university scholasticism, but admired the personality of Nicholas of Cusa and saw him as a very important contact for the implementation of the observant monastic reform plans. On the other hand, their positions on the main issues were absolutely different. For example, in contrast to Cusanus, John de Indagine remained a follower of the conciliarist party also in the years 1450–1451. Moreover, he was very critical of the philosophy of Plato and the whole ancient philosophy. Again, he regarded wisdom as the result of mys-

Mystical Modes of Medieval Philosophical Thought. A Tribute to Kent Emery, Jr. (= Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters 125). Leiden: Brill 2018, 636–674. As far as it is known, John de Indagine actually wrote at least two versions of the text under the title *De mystica theologia*. On the first version of this treatise, which is preserved as part of the manuscript Weimar Herzogin Anna Amalia Bibliothek (HAAB), Q 50, fols. 1r–60v, John de Indagine himself reports that he wrote this text around 1451: Erfurt, Bistumsarchiv, Ms. Hist. 1, fols. 257v; 336v–338r; KLAPPER, Joseph: *Der Erfurter Kartäuser Johannes Hagen. Ein Reformtheologe des 15. Jahrhunderts*, 2. Teil: *Verzeichnis seiner Schriften mit Auszügen* (= Erfurter Theologische Studien 10). Leipzig: St. Benno-Verlag 1961, 132, 145. The second version has been preserved in a manuscript from the Archbishop's Academic Library (Erzbischöfliche Akademische Bibliothek) in Paderborn. This version is not dated. But taking into account the usual manner of John de Indagine's work on his texts that was associated with detailed compilation notes on each topic, there is no reason to treat it as an earlier one than the Weimar version. At least, the concepts formulated in it can hardly be considered as derived from earlier ideas than those found in the Weimar version. Probably the work on both versions was almost parallel with some interruptions. In addition to long treatises on mystical theology, attributed to John de Indagine, a number of smaller fragments, devoted to the same topic and preserved among his manuscripts, should be also considered. For example, in the Russian State Library in Moscow, a four-page fragment on mystical theology (*De mystica theologia*) is preserved; it is a part of the extensive manuscript Fonds 201, No. 35 (old shelf mark H 135 of the Erfurt Carthusian Library), fols. 157r–158v. This text is an autograph of John de Indagine. Possible connections of this fragment with other versions of his treatises on mystical theology are not yet clear and require further investigations.

tical enlightenment of devotional living praxis of religious people. Wisdom as such is not only incomprehensible and inaccessible to the human intellect, but also inherently affective and irrational.

John de Indagine describes his basic ideas about the nature of wisdom in the treatise *De mystica theologia*. The Erfurt Carthusian distinguishes three main forms of attainment of wisdom. It is important to note that all these main forms represent one and the same indivisible wisdom which John de Indagine has in mind when, at the beginning of the chapter on wisdom⁶, he makes a clear reference to Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁷ Wisdom is unified because it is principle of unification. And this is the only point on which the views of Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa and the Erfurt Carthusian John de Indagine are completely in harmony with each other.

John de Indagine associated the first main form of the reception of wisdom (or, better to say, the first way to it) with rational cognition of God through His creation. In his opinion, such a realization is always confined to the weakness of human nature. The best thing to which it could lead is the recognition of person's own sinfulness and understanding of the necessity of constant penitential exercise for the forgiveness of sins. The pagan philosophers can help at this way the least of all. Even the best of them, the Platonists, who try to recognize the highest good, cannot reach the wisdom that Aristotle describes, because their sinful reason can hardly allow them to know truly their own souls and God.

The second way to wisdom is reserved principally for monks, who lead an ascetic life away from all worldly temptations, vanities and worries. At least, it can be concluded on the basis of the description of this form of wisdom which John de Indagine gives in his treatise. This ascetic way to wisdom does not teach to learn wisdom through the sensual natural knowledge of things, or from controversial and ambiguous writings of secular philosophers, but rather it brings monks to wisdom by the instructions of the holy teachers ("*sancti doctores*") in Christian life ("*non naturali modo, ut philosophi, sed ut docetur in fide catholica*").⁸

According to John de Indagine, the third way to wisdom ("*tercia acquisicio sapientie*") is "the most sublime and excellence" ("*sublimior et excellentior*"). It is intended for the few, because it is a mystical path in the true

⁶ IOANNES DE INDAGINE: op. cit, cap. 6, 648, 14–17 (= Ms. Paderborn, Erzbischöfliche Akademische Bibliothek, Cod. 118, fol. 166rb). An abbreviated parallel to this passage can also be found in the treatise on mystical theology of Jacob de Paradiso: JAKUB Z PARADYŻA: *Opuscula inedita*, ed. Stanisław Andrzej Porębski (= *Textus et studia historiam theologiae in Polonia excoltae spectantia* 5). Warszawa: Akademia Teologii Katolickiej 1978, 271, 1–5.

⁷ ARISTOTELES: *Metaphysica* I 1 (980a21); Aristoteles, *Ethica ad Nichomachum* X 7 (1177a12–13, 16–17).

⁸ IOANNES DE INDAGINE: op. cit, cap. 6, 650, 11–12 (= Ms. Paderborn, Erzbischöfliche Akademische Bibliothek, Cod. 118, fol. 166vb).

sense of the word. In this case, the Carthusian understands under mysticism an affective process of an over-rational ecstatic ascent to the summit of the soul:

“actualiter sine omni medio disponente animi ad superiora rapit et in dilectionem suam immediate sursum transfert et consurgere actibus extensionibus facit, que in mistica theologia tradita in apice affective que est synderesis.”⁹

Human reason does not help at all in this way: within the first two main forms, it has already become completely discredited, and within the framework of the third main form, the soul elevates above the rational faculties of a human being. Therefore, the Carthusian describes the third way to wisdom as an “irrational” and “foolish” way:

“Et vocat ipsam ‘irrationabilem’, quia nec ratio ipsam apprehendit neque ratione acquiritur neque investigatione studiosa nec etiam utitur ratione in suo usu sed tantum amore amentem vocat, id est, sine mente et intellectu quia nec ipsa in suo exercicio utitur intellectum nec ad ipsam perveniri potest per intellectum sed solum per affectum et amorem ferventissimam; ‘stultam’ vocat, quia sine usu omnimode intellegencie in solo affectu consurgit quam nullus apprehendere potest intellectus.”¹⁰

The whole line of argumentation seems here to be clear and unambiguous. Mystical experience has to do with the rational faculties of the human soul only at its first primitive stage, at which it works at the best as bad conscience. The mystical ecstasy as such is affective and irrational, and has nothing in common with the intellectual activity. Thus, the subjective-affective psychologized mysticism and universal rational knowledge permanently diverge in completely different directions.

I believe it would be unnecessary to say that such a conceptualization of the nature of wisdom and the manner of reaching it were entirely alien to Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (as well as it was earlier also completely alien to the Dominican friar Meister Eckhart). But he did not have to argue personally with the stubborn Erfurt Carthusian monk, because the defender of the general position of Nicholas of Cusa in favor of a rational nature of mysticism was found in the same Carthusian order. It was Nicholas Kempf. He came not from Erfurt, but from Strasbourg, however at the beginning of the controversy he already lived in Austria as a monk at the Charterhouse Gaming, whose prior he also was from 1451 to 1458. In his treatise *On Mystical Theology* (*Tractatus de mystica theologia*) he writes that the illuminating light of reason (“*illuminacio*”) is a necessary condition for gaining wisdom which human being acquires through habitual practice of virtues.

⁹ IOANNES DE INDAGINE: op. cit, cap. 6, 650, 23–26 (= Ms. Paderborn, Erzbischöfliche Akademische Bibliothek, Cod. 118, fol. 166vb).

¹⁰ IOANNES DE INDAGINE: op. cit, cap. 6, 651, 12–19 (= Ms. Paderborn, Erzbischöfliche Akademische Bibliothek, Cod. 118, fol. 167ra).

When human mind is enlightened by the light of natural reason and associated with the perfection of virtues, then its intellectual part also becomes receptive to the divine light:

“Secunda via, scilicet illuminacionis, sequitur immediate purgacionem, ut, aere purgato a vaporibus et nubibus, lumen sequitur et, remoto obstaculo, intrat lumen solis cenaculum. Ita lumen gracie, ablato peccato, intrat mentis triclinium. Quamvis autem illuminacio solum videtur sonare de intellectuallibus virtutibus et cognicionibus, in proposito tamen capienda est illuminacio prout extendit se ad omnes virtutes, sive naturales, sive morales, sive theologicas, tam intellectuales quam morales, quia valde imperfecta est illuminacio que fit solum in intellectu et non sequitur actus vel habitus perficiens affectum, tum quia communiter actus intelligibilis et voluntatis coniunguntur, tum quia magis valet ad propositum sic loqui de illuminacione, prout extendit se ad utramque anime potenciam, scilicet intellectum et affectum. Philosophi enim secuti solum intellectualem illuminacionem, et in ea tanquam summa perfectione quiescentes erraverunt.”¹¹

Nicholas Kempf reaffirms his position with numerous references to the Platonic and Neo-Platonic philosophers. Of course, he is familiar with Augustine’s criticism of Platonism. But he still believes that the Christians must study philosophy, especially Neo-Platonic philosophy. And he mentions Plotinus and Macrobius as the most influential key authors on this subject:

“Tercia vero via, scilicet unitiva, erit de actuali amore procedente ex illuminacione intellectus et affectus per habitus virtutum et donorum, ut patebit suo in loco. Ponit autem Plotinus philosophus, Platonis discipulus, et post eum Macrobius, quatuor gradus virtutum: tres in hominibus perfectis et quartum in Deo. Et quociens legi, miratus fui de tanta perfectione virtutum et earum cognicione in predicto philosopho et aliis philosophis.”¹²

“Et exponit idem philosophus, et extensius Macrobius, de quatuor virtutibus cardinalibus sic inquit: Illic prudentia est divina, non quasi in electione preferre, sed sola divina noscere et tanquam nichil aliud intueri. Temperancia est terrenas cupiditates non iam reprimere, sed penitus oblivisci. Fortitudinis est passiones ignorare, non vincere, ut irasci nesciat nichilque cupiat. Iusticie est ita hominem cum superna et divina mente sociari, ut cum ea fedus perpetuum servet imitando. Quartum genus virtutum ponit in mente divina, sic dicens: Si omnium rerum aliarum, multo magis virtutum ydeas esse in mente divina credendum est. Illic prudentia est mens ipsa divina; temperancia, quod in se, perpetua intencione, conversa est; fortitudo, quod idem est nec aliquando mutatur; iusticia, quod, perhenni lege ac sempiterni operis sui continuacione, non flectetur. Et subiungit: Hec quatuor genera virtutum, in passionibus quibus homines metuunt, cupiunt, dolent guadentque, maximam habent sui differentiam. Nam has passiones prime molliunt, secunde auferunt, tercie obliviscun-

¹¹ NICOLAUS KEMPF: *Tractatus de mystica theologia*, pars 2, cap. 5., eds K. Jellowschek/J. Barbet/F. Ruello. 2 Vols. (= *Analecta Cartusiana* 9). Salzburg: *Analecta Cartusiana* 1973, vol. 1, 106.

¹² NICOLAUS KEMPF: *op. cit.*, 106–107.

tur, in quartis nephas est nominari. Et scribitur de eodem philosopho quod, sicut illas virtutes docuit, ita non alieno sed proprio virtutis exemplo ostendit. Fuit enim ad omnium virtutum ornamenta compositus omniumque divinarum dispositionum studio formatus.”¹³

In fact, he reproduces here as an argument Macrobius’ paraphrasing of Plotinus’ treatise *On Virtue* (*Enneades* I 2), which takes place in his *Commentarius in Somnium Scipionis* (first book, chapter 8), one of the few texts with information on Plotinus’ philosophy, which was well known in Western Europe long before the complete translation of the works of Plotinus into Latin was made by Marsilio Ficino:

“[...] sed de beatitate quae debetur conservatoribus patriae pauca dicenda sunt [...] solae faciunt virtutes beatum, nullaque alia quisquam via hoc nomen adipiscitur. Unde qui aestimant nullis nisi philosophantibus inesse virtutes, nullos praeter philosophos beatos esse pronuntiant. Agnitionem enim rerum divinarum sapientiam proprie vocantes eos tantum modo dicunt esse sapientes, qui superna et acie mentis requirunt et quaerendi sagaci diligentia comprehendunt et, quantum vivendi perspicuitas praestat, imitantur: et in hoc solo esse aiunt exercitia virtutum, quarum sic officia dispensant. Prudentiae esse mundum istum et omnia quae mundo insunt divinorum contemplatione despiciere, omnemque animae cogitationem in sola divina dirigere; temperantiae omnia relinquere, in quantum natura patitur, quae corporis usus requirit; fortitudinis non terreri animam a corpore quodam modo ductu philosophiae recedentem, nec altitudinem perfectae ad superna ascensionis horrere; iustitiae ad unam sibi huius propositi consentire viam unius cuiusque virtutis obsequium. Atque ita fit ut secundum hoc tam rigidae definitionis abruptum rerum publicarum rectores beati esse non possint.”¹⁴

“[...] sed Plotinus inter philosophiae professores cum Platone princeps libro *De virtutibus* gradus earum vera et naturali divisionis ratione compositos per ordinem digerit. Quattuor sunt inquit quaternarum genera virtutum. Ex his primae politicae vocantur, secundae purgatoriae, tertiae animi iam purgati, quartae exemplares. Et sunt politicae hominis, qua sociale animal est. His boni viri rei publicae consulunt, urbes tuentur; his parentes venerantur, liberos amant, proximos diligunt; his civium salutem gubernant; hic socios circumspecta providentia protegent, iusta liberalitate devinciunt [...] his virtutibus vir bonus primum sui atque inde rei publicae rector efficitur, iuste ac provide gubernans, humana non deserens. Secundae, quas purgatorias vocant, hominis sunt qua divini capax est, solumque animum eius expediunt qui decrevit se a corporis contagione purgare et quadam humanorum fuga solis se inserere divinis. Hae sunt otiosorum qui a rerum publicarum actibus se sequestrant. Harum quid singulae velint superius expressimus, cum de virtutibus philosophantium diceremus, quas solas quidem aestimaverunt esse virtutes. Tertiae sunt purgati iam defecatique animi et ab omni mundi huius aspergine presse pureque detersti.

¹³ NICOLAUS KEMPF: op. cit, 108–109.

¹⁴ MACROBIUS: *Commentarius in somnium Scipionis* 1. 8, ed. J. Willis. Leipzig: Teubner 1970, 36.

Illic prudentiae est divina non quasi in electione praeferre, sed sola nosse, et haec tamquam nihil sit aliud intueri: temperantiae terrenas cupiditates non reprimere, sed penitus oblivisci; fortitudinis passiones ignorare, non vincere, ut *'nesciat irasci, cupiat nihil'* (Iuv. 10. 360), iustitiae ita cum supera et divina mente sociari ut servet perpetuum cum ea foedus imitando. Quarte sunt quae in ipsa divina mente consistunt, quam diximus *voŭv* vocari, a quarum exemplo reliquae omnes per ordinem defluunt. Nam si rerum aliarum, multo magis virtutum ideas esse in mente credendum est. Illic prudentia est mens ipsa divina, temperantia quod in se perpetua intentione conversa est, fortitudo quod semper idem est nec aliquando mutatur, iustitia quod perenni lege a sempiterna operis sui continuatione non flectitur. Haec sunt quaternarum quattuor genera virtutum, quae praeter cetera maximam in passionibus habent differentiam sui. Passiones [...] primae molliunt, secundae auferunt, tertiae obliviscuntur, in quartis nefas est nominari."¹⁵

The position of Nicholas Kempf is particularly interesting in the sense that he finds his arguments in favor of recognition of intellectual nature of wisdom not in the Aristotelian metaphysics, but in the Platonic or Neo-Platonic tradition. In his exposition on this subject he follows Plotinus and Macrobius, who describe the path to wisdom as an increase of virtues. Thus, the intellectual nature of wisdom is dependent on the ethical premises as well as on the inevitably ascetic form of cultivation of virtues. I think that this is precisely the reason why Cusanus does not follow the interpreting of the Plotinian ethics by Macrobius in his own concept of wisdom, but comes closer to the Platonic understanding of wisdom that Plato proposed in his dialogue *Phaedrus*.

For the reasons of content and chronology and because of the specificity of institutions involved, it seems to me to be improbable that Nicholas of Cusa's theory of wisdom presented in his *De Idiota* dialogues, interferes directly with the discussion developed in the closed Carthusian network (i.e., practically, in a strictly cloistered space of their "*clausurae*"). On the other hand, in these dialogues, he touches important problems of the Carthusian discussion on wisdom and solves the problem of the relationship of intellect and wisdom in a unique way: the intellect ("*mens*") is not simply a possible way to obtain wisdom (among many others) and not only a means to an exercise of wisdom, but it perceives wisdom, because it sees it intellectually without any intermediation. Compared to the conception of Aristotle, which describes wisdom in the sixth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1141a9–1141b7) as a dianoetic virtue, wisdom—according to Cusanus—is not a virtue, but rather the foundation of all virtues, that is, "*mens*" itself. It is difficult not to notice that the whole figure of thought sounds here very Platonic and refers to a text passage on the nature of wisdom from Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus* (250a–d).

¹⁵ MACROBIUS: op. cit., 37–39.

Unfortunately, it is not yet known with full accuracy when Nicholas of Cusa could read this dialogue of Plato. But we know that it is preserved in the Latin translation by Leonardo Bruni as part of Codex Cusanus 177 in the Cusanus Library in Bernkastel-Kues. Numerous marginalia, written by Nicholas of Cusa himself, clearly show that he had to read this Platonic text profoundly. And when one finds in the *De Idiota* dialogues ideas and figures of thought that should be taken from the Platonic *Phaedrus*, it means nothing else but a very probable fact that Nicholas of Cusa read Plato while working on his *De Idiota* dialogues (first of all, the dialogues *De sapientia* and *De mente*), that is, around the year 1450.

What makes us think that Nicholas of Cusa read Plato's *Phaedrus* just before the composition of the dialogues *De sapientia* and *De mente*? First, the form of these texts and their literary genre (namely, of dialogue) refer clearly to Plato, a fact that is hard to miss, and therefore it is not surprising that it has long attracted attention among the Cusanus researchers.¹⁶ Second, as in Plato's *Phaedrus*, the formalism of the sophists and rhetoricians is consistently and rigorously criticized in the *De Idiota* dialogues. Third, great metaphysical significance in these texts of Plato and Nicholas of Cusa is attributed to the beauty. Fourth, Nicholas of Cusa observes in a passage in his *De mente* dialogue (c. 14, nn. 154–155) that souls retain their knowledge even after death, what sounds like an allusion to Plato's *Phaedrus* (249b–250a).

However, for further observations on our subject matter, namely that of wisdom, not only these general remarks are important, but also forms and manner of the Cusanus reception of *Phaedrus*, especially the text passages directly dedicated to the subject of wisdom. In his still unpublished marginal notes to the Latin translation of the Platonic dialogue *Phaedrus* in Codex Cusanus 177, Nicholas of Cusa drew his attention to Plato's idea that "the sense of sight does not see the wisdom, although it is the sharpest of all senses": "Visus enim in nobis acutissimus est sensuum omnium qui per corpus fiunt, quo sapientia non cernitur"¹⁷. Nicholas of Cusa wrote with his own hand in the margin to this text passage: "Visus acutissimus [...] sapientia non cernitur"¹⁸. Developing this idea, Plato argues further in his dialogue that only beauty can connect our world with the Divine. It is to be understood as a visible image of the Divine, which, however, is perceived in contrast to wisdom by the faculties of the sense of sight¹⁹. There is only one problem in this theory: the immediacy of perception is not guaranteed by the physical senses. Only the spirit (intelligence) can guarantee it. That

¹⁶ FLASCH: *Nikolaus von Kues: Geschichte einer Entwicklung*, 270.

¹⁷ PLATO: *Phaedrus* 250d, transl. into Latin by Leonardo Bruni; Bernkastel-Kues, St. Nikolaus Hospital, Ms. 177, fol. 111r.

¹⁸ Bernkastel-Kues, St. Nikolaus Hospital, Ms. 177, fol. 111r.

¹⁹ PLATO: *Phaedrus* 250d-e, Bernkastel-Kues, St. Nikolaus Hospital, Ms. 177, fol. 111r.

means that the perception of beauty is not only a sensuous process, but also in its essence a mental and spiritual one.

As it is well known, Nicholas of Cusa goes even further in his dialogue: in his view, not only sense of sight, but also all senses are essentially spiritual (including the senses, which are strongly related to the flesh, e.g. the sense of taste, *De sapientia* n. 10 and n. 14, 4–10). In consequence, Cusanus notes that all what physical senses perceive is basically eternal wisdom. With all this, he uses the term “*sapientia*”, obviously following terminological choice of the translation by Leonardo Bruni, who translated the Greek word “*phronesis*” (“reasonableness”) into Latin as “*sapientia*” (“wisdom”). In the original text of *Phaedrus* (250d) Plato actually describes a cognitive necessary connection of beauty and reason (“*phronesis*”). Consequently, the path to wisdom goes for Plato only through beauty that represents the perfection of the invisible divine wisdom in this world, although it is at the same time sensible. Then Plato describes in his dialogue progressive stages of an ascent from the world of senses to the world of eternal ideas, that is, to wisdom itself. But Leonardo Bruni removes from his translation many text passages on the gradual ascent of the human soul in the striving for beauty following the Olympic gods, presumably because of their pagan content. Thus, Nicholas of Cusa could not be familiar with the entire Plato’s theory of ascent of the soul. As a result, he reduces it to the theory of a direct view of wisdom in all that human being perceives not only intellectually but also sensually. Compared to Plato, he concludes on the basis of the Latin translation by Leonardo Bruni, that it is not “reason”, but “eternal wisdom [...] is beauty in all what is beautiful”²⁰. However, at the same time, Nicholas of Cusa still understands wisdom as reason, which becomes according to him a *meta*-reason, as far as he interprets it as a principle of reason and spirit.

It is also important to the whole structure of the dialogue *De sapientia* that Nicholas of Cusa formulates here his concept of the principle very closely to Plato’s *Phaedrus* (245d) and also uses it as key argument for the necessity of a direct connection between the principle and the sequence. Plato says that the principle has no external reason, because it is the cause of everything: it is caused by nothing, but everything comes out of the principle. The principle is therefore eternal. It is to be understood as absolute beginning that never ends: “*Ex principio enim necesse est omne quod gignitur oriri; ipsum autem ex nullo. Nam si principium ex alio oriretur, non esset principium [...] ex principio omnia oriantur oportet*”²¹. For his part,

²⁰ NICOLAUS DE CUSA: *De sapientia*, n. 14, 4–6, in: NICOLAUS DE CUSA: *Opera omnia iussu et auctoritate Academiae litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita*. Vol. V: *Idiota de sapientia – de mente*. Hgg. L. Baur/R. Steiger, duas appendices adiecit R. Klibansky (= h V). Hamburg: Meiner 1983, 30: “*Aeterna sapientia in omni gustabili gustatur. Ipsa est delectatio in omni delectabili. Ipsa est pilchritudo in omni pilchro. Ipsa est appetitio in omni appetibili.*”

²¹ Bernkastel-Kues, St. Nikolaus Hospital, Ms. 177, fol. 108r.

Nicholas of Cusa comments on a margin to this passage: “*principium aeternum esse ostendit*” (ibid.). In the dialogue *De sapientia* of Nicholas of Cusa the following passage appears to be a manifestation of this Platonic concept of the principle, if it is not to be interpreted as an allusion to the quoted Platonic text passage: “Nam omnium principium est, per quod, in quo et ex quo omne principiabile principiatur, et tamen per nullam principiatum attingibile” (“For the principle is, first of all, that by which, and by virtue of which all is grounded, that can be grounded by a principle, and yet it is touchable by nothing which is grounded by a principle”, *De sapientia* n. 8, 5–7).²² The great significance of this Platonic figure of thought in the dialogue *De sapientia* is that it determines the whole structure and logic of this text. In addition, also the Cusanus researchers, e.g. Kurt Flasch, and others, have always drawn attention to this fact. Therefore, I will not discuss it here in detail.

In the light of the above mentioned, it is also remarkable that Cusanus obviously remains faithful to his idea of wisdom as it is represented in his *De Idiota* dialogues, when in one of his two survived Erfurt sermons he describes the process of intellectual knowledge of God with the support of analogies drawn from the practice of teaching philosophy of Aristotle and Plato:

“Nam homo visibilis <est> dulcedo seu sapientia Patris, et in illa Pater praestat vitam. Pater noster est Pater omnis esse, vitae et intellectus. Ipse praestat omnia, quae intellectum pascere possunt, ut aeternaliter vivat in Filio seu arte seu sapientia sua, sicut pater doctrinae praestat per medium magisterii seu artis in sensibili voce discipulo pabulum doctrinae. O quantum erat gaudium apostolis, quando petiverunt in nomine Jesu et acceperunt videntes se assecutos omne desideratum! Certe ‘plenum erat gaudium’, sicut quando daemonia eis oboediverunt, ac si scholares, qui summo desiderio appetere omnia scire, inveniunt verbum abbreviatum breve et cito apprehensibile Aristotelis, et quod in illo, quidquid scire appetere de omni scientia Aristotelis, assequerentur. Certe magnum gaudium haberent; sed adhuc maius, si etiam scientiam Platonis adhuc, etiam si Hippocratis etc.; sed maximum, si absolute omnium scibilium artem ibi esse experirentur.”²³

²² The translation is mine (M.Kh.). Other translations into English are offered by J. Hopkins and M.L. Führer: *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge*, transl. by J. Hopkins. Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press 1996, 500: “For the Beginning of all things is that by means of which, in which, and from which whatever can be originated is originated; and, nevertheless, [that Beginning] cannot be attained unto by any originated thing”; NICHOLAS OF CUSA: *The Layman on Wisdom and The Mind*, transl., with an introduction and notes, by M.L. Führer (= Renaissance and Reformation texts in translation 4). Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions 1989, 24: “For the principle of all things is that by which, in which, and from which, things with principles have principles. The principle itself, however, is not attainable by anything that has a principle.”

²³ NICOLAUS DE CUSA: Sermo LXXXIV, n. 6, 1–22, in: NICOLAUS DE CUSA: *Opera omnia iussu et auctoritate Academiae litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita*. Vol. XVII/

Although we cannot know with certainty whether these words of Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa were directed explicitly against the position of the Erfurt Carthusians, it could be unquestionably assumed that John de Indagine, if he was present in the church during the sermon, could hardly agree with them.

Nevertheless, in view of what has been said above, it is not excluded that the *De Idiota* dialogues were written in the context of the preparation of Cusanus' legation journey to Germany. That is, they could be written in the context of the discussion with the German and especially Erfurt Carthusians about the nature of wisdom. In contrast to the Carthusians, Nicholas of Cusa used as main source the dialogues of Plato, which his opponents could not yet have at their disposal, and therefore they could not read them. His position is not argued more strongly, but it is better reasoned, and therefore it is not surprising that the Erfurt Carthusians had to acknowledge it with the passage of time.

Finally, it is to point out that despite the personal encounter with Nicholas of Cusa in 1451, the Erfurt Carthusians most likely could not read and study his reflections on "*sapientia*" directly at the time when they personally contacted him. Only much later they discovered the importance of the *De Idiota* dialogues for explaining the mystical theory of a direct contemplation of the wisdom of God, as the Erfurt Carthusian librarian and confrere of John de Indagine from Salvatorberg Monastery, known as Jacob Volradi, copied these Cusanus' dialogues in the 1460s and 1480s and included them in his anthology of mystical texts.²⁴ But this is a very different story, and it would be superfluous to discuss it here.

Abstract

This study focuses on controversies in the understanding of wisdom, which can be found in Nicholas of Cusa's contacts with the Erfurt Carthusians in the middle of the fifteenth century after his visit to Erfurt in 1451. Nicholas of Cusa presented his rationalistic theory of wisdom in his De Idiota dialogues written in the summer of 1450 while preparing for a diplomatic journey to Germany. In contrast to the humanistically oriented Austrian Carthusian monk Nicholas Kempf and the Erfurt Carthusians, who expressed their affective and irrational view of wisdom in their writings on mystical theology, Nicholas of Cusa apparently relied in his theory of wisdom mainly on Plato's dialogues.

6: *Sermones* II (1443–1452). Hgg. H. Hein/H. Schnarr (= h XVII/6). Hamburg: Meiner 2007, 493–494. German translation: NIKOLAUS VON KUES: *Predigten in deutscher Übersetzung*. Bd. 2. Hg. am Institut für Cusanus-Forschung von W.A. Euler/V. Ranff/K. Reinhardt/H. Schwaetzer. Münster: Aschendorff Verlag 2013, 445.

²⁴ WILPERT, Paul: *Die Entstehung einer Miscellanhandschrift des 15. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Mittelateinisches Jahrbuch* 1 (1964), 34–47.