

THE INTELLECT-WILL PROBLEM IN THE THOUGHT OF
SOME NORTHERN RENAISSANCE HUMANISTS:
NICHOLAS OF CUSA

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This essay and a subsequent one will attempt to demonstrate the inadequacy of the definition of Renaissance humanism as a movement which sought primarily secular "wisdom" by the exercise of man's wholly autonomous intellect and will. Such a definition implies that humanist thought involved a radical separation of the realm of faith-grace from the realm of intellect-will. It would exclude certain Christian scholars in the North, including Colet and Erasmus, who saw some place for human intellect and reason in the study of human behavior and its causes, but who insisted upon a distinct revelational element in the quest for ultimate truth and wisdom. They rejected the natural theology of the Scholastics, preferring rather to confine the exercise of independent intellect and will to those matters only which are distinctively human. But, in respect to their concept of wisdom and the means of achieving it, they were prepared to accord a position of primacy to revelation and grace, without denying the co-operative effectiveness of human intellect and will.

The depiction of humanism as a movement which employed reason as the primary means of returning man to the ethical virtues of classical antiquity also excludes a figure such as Montaigne, who categorically rejected intellect and reason, along with revelation, as sources of unequivocal and universally applicable truth. He does not fit easily into either the revelationist or the secularist category, as so neatly differentiated for us by Eugene F. Rice.¹

¹ Eugene F. Rice, *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958); and "John Colet and the Annihilation of the Natural," *HTR*, 45 (July, 1952), 141-163.

It would seem that any adequate attempt to explain Renaissance humanism as a movement must take account of the central concerns of a whole series of scholars, without attempting to exclude any because of their commitments in areas of thought not necessarily characteristic of the movement as a whole. Erasmus' "philosophia Christi" could not be regarded as characteristic of humanism generally. Because it was important to Erasmus, and yet involved respect for revelation, would we reject him as a humanist? The fact is that Erasmus, like humanists generally, discarded the natural theology of the Scholastics and came to certain conclusions in regard to man on the basis of a different use of intellect and will. This use of intellect and will in the search for truth about man was not identical for all humanists, and it did not necessarily involve repudiation of major elements of the Christian tradition.

In a certain sense, Nicholas of Cusa (ca. 1400-1464) was a pioneer humanist in the North and a forerunner of the more famous transalpine humanists of the early 16th century. It will be fitting therefore to treat him in this initial brief essay. Erasmus, Colet, and Montaigne will be dealt with in a subsequent study.

1. *The Influence of Cusa's Philosophy*

Adolph Harnack regarded Nicholas of Cusa as the 15th-century forerunner and leader of the writers who in the following century, inspired by a Platonic view of the cosmos, "brought so strong and fresh a current of real illuminism into the world."² These thinkers laid the foundation for the scientific investigation of nature and were the restorers of scientific thought. John Dolan agrees, despite his recognition of the distinctively medieval aspects of Cusa's thought. Dolan argues, "His emphasis on the quantitative rather than the rational, marks him as a pioneer in the breakthrough that was to produce the prevailing ideologies

² Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma* (New York, 1900, 1961), 6, 171.

of man in the western world."³ Modern philosophers have depicted Cusa as a forerunner of Kant, recognizing the *Learned Ignorance* as paralleling in purpose and scope the *Critique of Pure Reason*.⁴ Ernst Cassirer treats the thought of Cusa as the natural starting point for a systematic study of Renaissance philosophy.⁵ Using the philosophical language of Scholasticism, Cusa expressed "thoughts which in their actual content and tendency pointed far beyond the boundaries of Scholasticism."⁶

Eugene F. Rice, on the other hand, represents Cusa's concept of wisdom as a superlative statement of the Augustinian medieval tradition that wisdom is "a Revelational knowledge of the Christian God."⁷ In fact, Rice sees Nicholas of Cusa's *De sapientia* (1450) as the most important work on wisdom in the Middle Ages. Although it represented a reaction to the kind of rationalism that Aquinas employed, *De sapientia* is a thoroughly medieval document, since the Augustinian tradition which it perpetuated was the salient strand of thought in the Middle Ages. According to Rice the philosophical skepticism and religious mysticism of Cusa were just as characteristic of the late Middle Ages as was scholastic rationalism. Hence Rice identifies Cusa's philosophy, not as the forerunner of a characteristic Renaissance motif in respect to wisdom, intellect, and will, but as the epitome of that medieval traditionalism against which Renaissance humanism in general was a reaction. The central emphasis of Renaissance humanism, Rice tells us, involved the secularization of wisdom. "Wisdom is acquired, that is, by man's own unaided efforts, and describes a natural human perfection. It is in the area of nature, not in that of redemption; and has, consequently, no necessary

³John Patrick Dolan, ed., *Unity and Reform: Selected Writings of Nicholas de Cusa* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1962), p. 3.

⁴Ibid., p. 4.

⁵Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* (New York, 1963), p. 7.

⁶Ibid., p. 19.

⁷Rice, *Ren. Idea of Wisdom*, p. 19.

relation to Christianity.”⁸ This was a humanist repudiation of “Gothic barbarism” and “darkness” and a reappropriation of the classical concept of wisdom and the means of attaining it.⁹

Rice presents the thought of those Renaissance humanists who followed Cusa’s lead as a medieval survival. He includes the Florentine Neo-Platonists, John Colet, Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples, and the 16th-century Reformers. But we may ask, Was not the line of development followed by Cusa, Colet, and the humanist Reformers equally characteristic of the Renaissance as was the trend that led to the radical separation of wisdom from the Christian message? Must we accept the idea that the humanists who secularized wisdom and thereby invested man with autonomous intellect and will, indeed with “a natural human perfection,”¹⁰ were the *only* genuine Renaissance figures?

It would seem possible to trace a line of development from the late medieval natural theologians to the Renaissance secularists. Both emphasized the efficacy of natural reason and will in respect to ethics, even if the secularists demoted the intellect as a means of grasping first causes. But just as the concerns of the secular humanists may be represented as a sharp break with the past, despite their medieval undergirding, so also the concerns of those “Christian humanists” who stayed close to Cusa may be represented as in many ways quite distinct from characteristic medieval motifs. In this respect, it appears that Harnack, Dolan, and Cassirer have the better of the argument.

2. *Cusa and the Neo-Platonic Hierarchies*

The major influences on the thought of Nicholas of Cusa are identified by Paul Sigmund as the medieval Neo-Platonists and mystics. The Neo-Platonic cosmology and theology were available

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

directly to Cusa in the writings of Proclus (418-485). Copies of the latter's works with heavy marginal comments are in the library at Kues.¹¹ Furthermore, even if Cusa had not read the writings of Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite before writing the *De docta ignorantia*, he must have been exposed to Dionysius' major theories from the works of Eriugena, Bonaventura, and Albertus Magnus.¹² Sigmund thinks that the outline of his hierarchical system in the first book of *De concordantia catholica* is sufficient evidence that Cusa had derived knowledge of Dionysius' views at least from secondary sources.¹³ Cusa's ideas of learned ignorance and the coincidence of opposites are traced by Sigmund to Augustine, Bonaventura, and Eckhart.¹⁴

Eckhart drew on the negative theology of Christian Neo-Platonism to undermine the Plotinian conception of a hierarchical universe proceeding by emanation from God to the lowest orders of creation. For Eckhart, there was no question of an overflowing or emanation; God was present everywhere and identified with everything. The soul could commune directly with Him, and was not required to rise through the various levels of creation. God was a superessential Nothingness, who could not be described except by negations, yet He was present in the individual soul. Paradoxically, the negative theology by removing God from creation brought Him closer to it. A similar turning of Neo-Platonism against itself took place in Nicholas of Cusa's thought when he composed his *On Learned Ignorance*.¹⁵

Nevertheless, Sigmund considers that Cassirer and Hoffmann have exaggerated Cusa's break with the medieval hierarchical universe.¹⁶ Sigmund argues that Cusa retains a hierarchy of value in the created universe.¹⁷ Even the idea of a vast gulf between finite man and the infinite God was not foreign to the "negative theology" of the Middle Ages and the thought of

¹¹ Paul E. Sigmund, *Nicholas of Cusa and Medieval Political Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), p. 44.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 247-249.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 62, 246, 247.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 256-257.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 257-258.

the Neo-Platonists. Sigmund thinks that Hoffmann is correct in tracing this idea to Plato's *chorismos*. Plato separated the finite world of appearances from the infinite, real world of Ideal Forms. But Sigmund argues that this idea was never rejected by the Neo-Platonic tradition of the Middle Ages.¹⁸ A hierarchically ordered universe is essential to Cusa's *De docta ignorantia*. Sigmund quotes from Book II of the *De docta ignorantia*. "For any given finite being, there is a greater or lesser necessarily to be found," but there is nothing greater or lesser than the infinite.¹⁹ In the universe, genera of being are divided into species, each of which is composed of individuals. Some of these are on a higher level of existence than others. But Sigmund seems to have overlooked the fact that in Cusa's view mystical intuition was not preceded by dialectical ascent. He states:

While it is true that, according to Nicholas, one can never by the study of these genera and species . . . arrive at an adequate understanding of the Godhead, this was also admitted in the Neo-Platonic theology. At the end of the dialectical ascent to union with God, there is still an infinite distance which can only be traversed by mystical intuition.²⁰

In Cusa's scheme there were intermediary beings between God and man, but the intermediary were not mediators between the two.

It is, however, the radical existential element which is so characteristic of Cusa's faith. He wrote, "For if aught could mediate between human nature and the absolute mediator, human nature would not then be united unto Thee in the closest degree."²¹ The "absolute mediator" was Christ. The finite believing man who is linked by faith with Christ, the "most perfect image" of humanity as well as divinity, has some apprehension of

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 258-259.

²⁰ Ibid.; cf. Nicolaus Cusanus, *Of Learned Ignorance*, trans. Fr. Germain Heron (New Haven, Conn., 1954), p. 16.

²¹ Dolan, p. 169.

the infinite, unknowable God.²² It is the immediacy of this relationship which is the distinguishing element in Cusa's concept of man's quest for knowledge of the Divine. It is this element which Cassirer so effectively delineates:

For in this union, we see ourselves taken beyond all empirical differences of being and beyond all merely conceptual distinctions, to the simple origin, i.e., to the point that lies beyond all divisions and antitheses. In this kind of vision, and only in it, the true *filiatio Dei* is attained which Scholastic theology had sought in vain to reach, even believing itself able, so to speak, to extort it by means of the discursive concept.²³

Although Cusa never attacked the Neo-Platonic view of the cosmos, and although his ideas were still very much rooted in the general medieval conception, the "classical" Aristotelian and Scholastic view contradicted his fundamental principle in two ways.²⁴ First, the Scholastic vision arranged the element of the heavens and the four earthly elements "in a spatial relationship that also implies a gradation of values."²⁵ Cusa rejected any such concept of nearness or distance between the visible and the unseen worlds. Second, since perfection is not a demonstrable quality in the sensible world, the cosmos is not a perfect sphere or an exactly circular orbit.²⁶ Hence the question of the central point of the universe was irrelevant to Nicholas. God is the center of everything that exists. He is not only the central point in the universe but also its circumference. His essence includes all other essences within itself.²⁷ It was Cusa's view of the cosmos which, according to Cassirer, led to the rejection of the geocentric conception of the universe and the new approach to astronomy.²⁸

The important point for this essay is that Cusa's idea of learned ignorance was based on two presuppositions: God's

²² *Ibid.*, p. 171.

²³ Cassirer, p. 14.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

infinite exaltation above any hierarchy of existence, and man's possibility of very partial knowledge only on the basis of an immediate faith-love relationship with the infinite. Since God is the unknowable One, He cannot be discovered in any degree by natural reason. It was Cusa's existential theology that constituted a break with the past.

3. *Cusa's Concept of Man and Human Knowledge*

The *De docta ignorantia* clearly teaches the impotence of the human will, apart from Christ, in respect to matters spiritual.

At a higher level the intelligence recognizes that, even when the senses are subjected to reason by the denial of the passions which are so natural to it, man would still be incapable of attaining by himself the end of his intellectual and eternal aspirations. For man is begotten of the seed of Adam by carnal pleasure which in the act of propagation triumphs over the spirit. And therefore, his nature, originally rooted in carnal delights—for through these did man take origin from his parents—remains quite impotent to transcend temporal things in order to embrace spiritual. . . . No man was ever yet able of himself to rise above himself and above his own nature, so subject from its origin to carnal desire, and, thus freed, ascend to eternal and heavenly things, save He who came down from heaven Jesus Christ. . . . In Christ then, human nature itself by its union with God is raised to the highest power and escapes the weight of temporal and downward-dragging desires.²⁹

This is the Augustinian concept of original sin minus the doctrine of inherited guilt. The atonement of Christ, Cusa tells us, renders possible the purification of human nature from carnal propensities. This occurs when, with faith formed by love, degraded humanity enters into union with the "maximal of human nature" (Christ), so that "if we possess Him we possess all things."³⁰ Nevertheless the individuality of man remains intact.³¹ The will of man is bound until released by the divine Source.

De pace fidei presents another compartment of human nature

²⁹ Dolan, p. 75.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

³¹ *Ibid.*

apart from the "lower nature" which is "detained in ignorance."³² This is the intellectual and interior man which is part of the life of God. The atonement and mediatorial work of Christ are designed to enable man "to walk according to his interior rather than his exterior nature."³³ Cusa thought of man's soul as triune since it was created in the likeness of the Trinity.³⁴ The three parts are the mind, the intellect or wisdom, and the will or love. "The mind exercises the intellect or wisdom from which comes the will or love. . . ."³⁵ Man, therefore, has his being from the divine Being but is in himself a three-fold productive being. If this were not so, Cusa says, the world could not exist. As Cassirer points out, Cusa considered man to be a kind of "created God," "the divine in the form and within the limits of the human."³⁶ It is doubtful, however, whether Cassirer is correct in identifying a significant Pelagian spirit in Cusa's thought.³⁷ The doctrine of learned ignorance stresses what man cannot do in the apprehension of the divine. Freedom to choose faith or non-faith is not distinctively Pelagian. Moreover, Cusa's notion of the predominance of human intellectual freedom, exercised in the areas of judgment, comparison, and evaluation, only after the act of faith, would seem to rule out any radical bias toward Pelagianism. On the other hand, the concept of faith formed by love, as distinct from *sola fide*, is semi-Pelagian.

By the concept of "learned ignorance" Cusa attempts to convince us that only in a frank admission of the complete impotence of human intellect and reason in the search for absolute truth, coupled with reliance by faith on that relative knowledge of himself which the Absolute chooses to reveal, is it possible for

³² Ibid., p. 198.

³³ Ibid., pp. 198-199.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 209-210.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 209.

³⁶ Cassirer, p. 43.

³⁷ Ibid.

man to transcend the intellectual barrenness of his fallen condition. Absolute truth is impossible to us in this life and that which is to come.³⁸ The truth is "absolute necessity, while, in contrast with it, our intellect is possibility."³⁹ "It is reason (which is much lower than intellect) that gives names to things in order to distinguish them from one another. The reconciliation of contradictories is beyond reason. . . ."⁴⁰ Only in the Absolute Maximum are such contradictions reconciled. God comprises all things in his absolute unity.⁴¹ Only negative propositions concerning him can be used. Such negative theology resolves itself into a one-word description of God — Infinite.⁴²

Dolan and Cassirer both argue that, since in Cusa's thought the intellect is superior to the will, the knowledge made available by Christ is a kind of intellectual grasp.⁴³ Dolan argues that "the entire philosophic structure of Nicholas is conceived as the indoctrination by means of which we are able to fully grasp the ultimate significance of Christ."⁴⁴ It would seem that Dolan has not fully realized the mystical nature of the knowledge concerning which Cusa speaks. His emphasis is not on the efficacy of any kind of indoctrination but on a mystical relationship in which the finite intellect of man becomes merged with the infinite intellect of the Supreme Maximum. Cassirer calls this *amor Dei intellectualis*.⁴⁵ It is an intellectual vision, a kind of mystical beatific vision based on the intellect rather than the will.⁴⁶ Cassirer seems to have missed the point, however, when he asserts that Cusa's theology "demands . . . a new type of mathematical logic. . . ."⁴⁷

³⁸ Cusanus, pp. 12, 61.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 12.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 54.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., p. 60.

⁴³ Dolan, p. 189; Cassirer, p. 13.

⁴⁴ Dolan, p. 189.

⁴⁵ Cassirer, p. 13.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 14.

Rather, the impression gained from reading Cusa's works is that the mathematical discussions are simply incorporated for illustrative purposes. They prove nothing and were not intended to. If Cusa had replaced Scholastic logic by mathematical logic he would have effectively negated the concept of "learned ignorance."

4. *The Implications of Cusa's Thought*

Since Cusa thought of the universe as a unity in diversity, in every part of which the Absolute Maximum is manifested, the ideal of political and religious order and harmony was, to him, quite realistic. He was a political and religious universalist.⁴⁸ His conciliar theory was based on the possibility of the unanimous agreement of Christians.⁴⁹ If contradictions are reconciled in Christ, all those who have faith should be able to achieve a Christian consensus. Harmony would be achieved, he thought, when each part of the Church and Empire was functioning in accord with its inherent pattern.⁵⁰ The salient point in *De pace fidei* is that at the heart of all religions is recognition of God as the Maximum.⁵¹ The Christian religion is superior to all others, but there is a basic agreement in them all. He urges reconciliation of differences so that unity may be achieved. But this reconciliation involves compromise, even for his Church, in those areas which are more related to outward practice of religion than to the central elements of faith.⁵²

⁴⁸ Dolan, p. 35; Sigmund, pp. 122-123.

⁴⁹ Dolan, p. 25.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 32.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 187.

⁵² Ibid., p. 197.