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### **The Conjectural Art as Self-Knowledge and Knowledge of Others: Tradition and Innovation**

In the last chapter of “De coniecturis”, Cusanus exhorts his friend, Cardinal Giuliano Cesarini, to get to know himself. This classical philosophical topic is revisited by Cusanus here in an original manner. On the one hand, Cusanus’ perspective reveals the strong influence of Proclus, which deserves to be highlighted. On the other, unlike Proclus, Cusanus asserts that self-knowledge is explicitly linked to the topic of the human being as created *ad imaginem* and that of the world as the sphere of contraction. Cusanus bases both subjective matters on the triune principle. According to him, the Divine Trinity is the exemplar that cannot be reached by an image, and the effort to reach the Trinity constitutes the basic requirement for the conjectural construction of the self. Furthermore, the fact that this understanding of the Trinity implies a distinction in itself makes the Trinity the principle of all difference or otherness in plurality. Cusanus concludes that the image can only be constructed relationally, that it is not possible to attain God without a fundamental knowledge of the self as an image, and that no one knows his own self without knowing others at the same time.

*Keywords: De coniecturis, self-knowledge, image, otherness*

Although the subject-matter of self-knowledge is central to Cusanus’ thought and has been sufficiently addressed, the relation between self-knowledge and the conjectural art has not yet been given enough attention.

The last chapter of “De coniecturis” is entitled “De sui cognitione”.<sup>1</sup> There are at least two ways of understanding why this topic is thematized in this chapter: it may be understood either as an appendix or as a conclusive focal point to which the whole work leads. My perspective is the latter, based on the fact that in this chapter, Cusanus takes into consideration all the important issues that he previously developed: the notion of conjecture (*coniectura*), the four unities of the mind, identity and otherness, participation, and, finally, the most important of the diagrams presented for their illustration: the Paradigmatic Figure (*Figura P*) and the circle of the universe (*Figura U*). All these subject-matters, developed throughout the first book, are the elements that form the basis of the conjectural art, which in this last chapter is employed in the service of a traditional philosophical topic: self-knowledge.

It is known that the subject of self-knowledge has been frequently approached in Classical philosophy, both by the Ancients and in its Medieval continuation. Cusanus was familiar with many of these developments. I do not intend here to carry out an exhaustive analysis of sources implicitly or explicitly considered by Cusanus. Instead, I will try to show to what extent Cusanus deepens what he received from existing authors and to what extent he innovated upon their approach. Much has been said regarding the “modernity” of Cusanus’ thought, and this paper is not the place to touch upon it. My own perspective has more to do with the key idea pointed out by Hans Blumenberg: Cusanus is not a “precursor” or the “founder” of a historical age but rather is on the “threshold” of an era enriching several of the positions that were developed before him.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, I contend that the last chapter of “De coniecturis” confirms my perspective. In it, as the closing of a complex and innovative work, Cusanus recovers and reiterates the sacred Delphic maxim, “know thyself” (γνῶθι σεαυτόν).

### 1. *The Four Unities and the “centrum totius vitae”*

Since Plato’s “Alcibiades”, self-knowledge has been linked to another topic: care of the self. Christianity has taken up this topic from different perspectives. For example, we should keep in mind that Petrarch rediscovers it by opening Augustine’s “Confessions” on Mount Ventoux, an arc that goes from the dawn of the Middle Ages to its very dusk:

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas of Cusa’s Works are cited from the critical edition: Nicolai de Cusa, *Opera Omnia*, iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita (h). We offer the traditional abbreviation of each text, book and chapter where appropriate, and between brackets, the volume and paragraph of the critical edition. Cf. De coni. II c.17 (h III nn. 171-184).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Blumenberg (1988).

And men went out to admire the heights of mountains, and the immense sea surges, and the wide riverbeds and the immensity of the ocean and the orbit of the stars and they forgot to look at themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Knowledge and care of the self are linked: no one can take care of himself if he does not know himself. This is mentioned by Cusanus in one of his last works, “De venatione sapientiae”, not by directly citing Plato’s dialogue but by referencing “Theologia platonica” I, 3 by Proclus. There, he affirms the doctrine of Plato:

Proclus reports in Book One of *The Theology of Plato* that in the *Alcibiades* [133b-c] Socrates, who represents Plato, says that when the intellective soul looks within itself, it observes God and all things. [...] For he says that all things are present in us in an enlivened way. This is the divine judgment of Plato.<sup>4</sup>

It is highly likely that earlier, when writing “De coniecturis”, Cusanus did not know this passage from Proclus’ text. With regard to the work “Theologia platonica”, it can only be said that he knew short passages translated by Ambrogio Traversari, which are contained in the “Codicillus” of Strasbourg (*Codex Argentoratensis* 84).<sup>5</sup> Those short passages correspond to Book I of the Proclean text, but do not include any reference to the above-mentioned passage of the “Alcibiades”. However, in them, there appears a formula that definitively refers to self-knowledge: “*centrum totius vitae*”. This formula of “Theologia platonica” I, 3 is taken almost literally by Nicholas of Cusa in “De coniecturis”.<sup>6</sup> W. Beierwaltes has already sufficiently clarified to what extent Cusanus is indebted to “Theologia platonica”.<sup>7</sup> Cusanus tries to show in “De coniecturis” that just as the real world has its origins in the infinite divine reason (*divina infinita ratio*) and that this reason is the world’s measure (*mensura*) and entity (*entitas*), so conjectures have their origin in the unity of the human mind (*unitas humanae mentis*), and this unity is its own measure and entity. In this way, the more the enfolding unity of our mind contemplates itself, the more it “explains” or unfolds from itself in the conjectural world. And as it returns from there to its own unity, it becomes more fecund. However, its own end is not in itself but in infinite reason, the only measure of everything. The deeper it goes into itself, the more it resembles infinite reason, because the mind has within itself a single vital center (*unicum vitalem centrum*).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Augustinus: Confessiones X c.8.

<sup>4</sup> De ven. sap. (h XII n.49): “[...] in Alcibiade dicere intellectivam animam, cum intra se conspicit, deum et omnia speculari [...] Omnia enim in nobis animaliter esse dicit. Ecce divinum Platonis iudicium.” Translation by Hopkins (1996: 1308).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Haubst (1961: 17-51).

<sup>6</sup> De coni. I c.1 (h III n.5).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Beierwaltes (2000: 629-651).

<sup>8</sup> De coni. I c.1 (h III n.5): “Deus autem omnia propter se ipsum operatur, ut intellectuale sit principium pariter et finis omnium; ita quidem rationalis mundi explicatio, a nostra complicante mente progrediens, propter ipsam est fabricatricem. Quanto enim ipsa se in explicato a se mundo subtilius contemplatur, tanto intra se ipsam uberius fecundatur, cum finis ipsius ratio

In addition to the formula that Cusanus copied literally, it is also necessary to consider the rest of the statements of Proclus that are found in the passages of “Theologia Platonica” I, 3 and copied in the “Codicillus”. There, Proclus presents the levels of reality progressing towards the One. He calls them *corporalia*, *anima*, and *intellectus* (the Latin terms chosen by Traversari) and presents them in a descending chain of causality. These levels have relations of participation with each other. However, there is a conceptual novelty that surely caught the attention of Cusanus: the notion of the unity as imparticipable. Proclus considers that the “all” presides (*praeest*) over a “multitude” that gathers in this same unity. Moreover, everything, without exception, becomes the imparticipable unity (*ad unam convertit imparticipabilem unitatem*). Thus, Proclus argues that there not only are movements of procession and return but also an instance of incommunicable permanence. Proclus is clear in pointing out that the nature of the divine is attained (*atingitur*) neither by sense, nor by imagination, nor by rational intelligence (*nec sensu, imaginatione aut rationali intelligentia*). A short passage from “Theologia Platonica” I, 11 completes what appears in the “Codicillus”. In it, an allusion is made again to the unities in descending order towards multiplicity: the first (*primum*) is a simple unity (*unum*), the intellect is one-multiple (*intellectum unum multa*), the soul is one and multiple (*animam unum et multa*), and the body is multiple and one (*corpus multa et unum*).

The four unities thematized by Nicholas of Cusa in “De coniecturis” are undoubtedly based on the onto-gnoseological correspondence of Proclean Neoplatonism, and this perspective will continue to be deepened in his later writings.<sup>9</sup> Cusanus includes in this work the notion of imparticipability, an idea that will no longer apply only to the first principle but also to intermediate unities: imparticipable in themselves but participable in another. God, the intellect, the soul, and the body are unities whose relations are clarified with the conceptual binomial used in “De docta ignorantia”: *complicatio-explicatio*. The higher enfolds the lower and the lower unfolds the higher. The first unity enfolds everything without being the unfolding of anything. The last one is a mere unfolding. The intermediate ones enfold and unfold simultaneously.

There is no doubt that “De coniecturis” presents the unfolding in the indicated double register: the unfolding of God in the real world and the unfolding of the *mens* in the conjectural world. This supports the fact that the entire doctrinal approach leads to self-knowledge as a unifying element. In “Theologia Platonica” I, 3, in one of the passages copied in the “Codicillus”, it is possible to read the principle that may be understood as inspiring the entire “De coniecturis”: “*simile*

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sit infinita, in qua tantum se, uti est, intuebitur, quae sola est omnibus rationis mensura. Ad cuius assimilationem tanto propinquius erigimur, quanto magis mentem nostram profundaverimus, cuius ipsa unicum vitale centrum existit. Ob hanc causam naturali desiderio ad perficientes scientias aspiramus.”

<sup>9</sup> D'Amico (2019).

*a simili cognoscitur*”. Proclus shows that each of the regions of reality corresponds to a way of being known: the sensible is known by the sense (*sensu sensibile*), the opinionable by the opinion (*opinione opinabile*), the thinkable by the thought (*cogitatione cogitabile*), the intelligible by the intellect (*intellectu intelligibile*), the maximally one by the one (*uno cognoscimus unicissimum*), and what is ineffable by the ineffable (*ineffabili id, quod est ineffabile*). This correspondence among ways of being and of knowing has immediate consequences: self-knowledge, unavoidable as the way back to the first principle, is necessarily interior. For Proclus, the soul sees (*conspicere*) in itself everything else and God Himself. For by turning inwardly (*introspicens*) to its union, the center of its life (*centrum totius vitae*), and ridding itself (*excutiens*) of the multiplicity and diversity of virtues it possesses, it ascends (*ascendit*) to the same extreme height of what it is. And, just as the initiates receive the divine splendor (*divinus splendor*), as the Oracles say, by participating in the divinity, in the same way, the soul attains it by contemplating the universe: when it turns to the lower, it sees shadows or simulacra of what it is (*umbras atque simulacra*), when it returns to itself, it collects (*colligit*) its own essence and its reasons (*essentiam propriam atque rationes*). First, it contemplates only itself, but then, striving for this knowledge of itself, it discovers in it (*inveniat in se*) the intellect and all the orders of what is (*intellectum et entium ordines*): all things are found in the soul as the soul is (*omnia sunt in nobis animaliter*). This formula is almost identical to the one found in the passage from “De venatione sapientiae” discussed above. The soul can achieve the most perfect science of the divine (*perfectissima scientia divinorum*) when it ascends towards the supreme principle of things (*ad supremum rerum principium*). Once there, by descending (*descendendo*) through what it is, and having collected (*collecta*) the multitude of species, the soul recognizes them intellectually (*intellectualiter*) as dependent on their own unity.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the same orientation can be seen in both thinkers: the realization of the human spirit, which, in the unfolding of its own strength or virtue, knows itself and God in a simultaneous movement of ascent and descent. The soul, by seeing everything else and God, tends to its own unity and to the center of its entire life. Still more: the self of the human being is nothing other than his divine foundation.

However, Beierwaltes has accurately pointed out that, despite the fact that Proclus and Cusanus agree on the need to return to the center of life, certain differences emerge, particularly in relation to the identity between being and thinking and in the Christian conception of triunity of God.<sup>11</sup> To Beierwaltes’ argument, I would like to add other differences that are certainly complementary.

<sup>10</sup> Haubst (1964).

<sup>11</sup> Beierwaltes (2000: 644): “Der proklischen Intention, in einer denkenden Selbstvergewisserung des ‘Einen in uns’ durch dieses zum Einen selbst zu gelangen, entspricht bei Cusanus der Gedanke, dass das Denken sich selbst auf den ihm immanenten Grund kommt, der zugleich in einem ihm transzendenten Absoluten gründet. Cusanus unterscheidet sich freilich von dem

In the first place, it is necessary to underscore that self-knowledge appears as a *conditio sine qua non* for the ignorant to achieve ineffable knowledge of the absolute: whoever does not know himself does not experience or attain (*attingere*) God. The foundation of this will be found in the Christian topic of the image (*imago*), which has its true being in the exemplar but attains its role only by recognizing itself as an image and not being identical with the exemplar.

In the second place, for Cusanus, self-knowledge necessarily implies consideration of others: in the sphere of the multiple, identity is also defined by relative opposition to otherness. This point is complementary and follows the consideration of the triunity of the divine principle.

Unlike in Proclus, self-knowledge as it is presented in “De coniecturis” appears clearly linked to the theme of image and otherness. In both, there is a Trinitarian foundation. The divine Trinity is an exemplar whose internal distinction does not involve otherness. However, it is itself the principle of all differentiation in the sphere of the plural. Multitudinous reality is defined as unity in otherness, and this implies that it is relational. Every relation in the sphere of the multiple finds its principle in the relationality of a triune God.

No one can attain God without self-knowledge as an image of the Trinity. No one knows himself without consideration of others.

## 2. Conjecture and Image

The word *coniectura* was not coined by Nicholas of Cusa. J-M. Counet, in his introduction to the French translation of Cusanus’ text, traces the use of the term in philosophical texts from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas as a reflection of rhetorical and even medical uses, the latter of which Cusanus could have known from a work by Galen that he had in his library.<sup>12</sup>

I would like to add one of the most immediate antecedents to Cusanus: “Expositio...” by Berthold of Moosburg, the first commentator on Proclus in the medieval West.<sup>13</sup> K. Flasch has drawn attention to “Expositio”.<sup>14</sup> The general objective of “Expositio” is to build scientific knowledge. With this objective, Berthold calls “conjectures” the principles of Proclean science (that take place as its starting point) as well as a kind of assent to the principles that come from both a cognitive principle and a specific habit. As R. Imbach has recently point-

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proklischen Begriff des Einen selbst darin, dass er – aus primär christlicher Tradition heraus begründet – die göttliche ‘unitas absoluta’ mit dem Sein selbst und dem absoluten Denken (‘ratio infinita’, ‘conceptus absolutus’) identisch setzt und die Einheit zugleich als in sich relationale Dreiheit (Trinität, ‘unitrinum principium’) denkt.”

<sup>12</sup> Counet (2011: LXX-LXXV).

<sup>13</sup> Bertholdus de Mosburch (1984).

<sup>14</sup> Flasch (1984: XXXV-XXXVIII).

ed out, Berthold's notion of conjecture tries to place the principles of what is "beyond being" on an equal footing with those of natural science. In this sense, Berthold's claim is not far from that of a contemporary university theology instructors who give theology the status of a scientific knowledge. However, Cusanus' originality consists in having developed the idea of *coniectura* from a Neoplatonic viewpoint.<sup>15</sup> The "excessus" of Dionysus and Proclus is now accessible on a scientific basis, and this mode of knowledge is called "conjectural."<sup>16</sup>

It is known that Cusanus' word *coniectura* also takes its root from the Dionysian and Proclean line of *excessus*. Yet, his notion of *coniectura* does not pretend to give scientific status to the knowledge of not-knowing. Conjecture as a "*positiva assertio*" and as the exclusive territory of the *regio humanitatis* rather seeks self-knowledge or re-cognition of its own *mens* in its activity, which inexorably tends towards truth. Thus, although Cusanus' sources are similar to those of Berthold, he ends up proposing something very different by bringing together the Proclean seed with other sources of the Christian tradition in which the theme of image is crucially important.

The human mind, as the living image of the eternal exemplar, unfolds conjecturally. At the same time, conjectures can be understood as images in which the mind is reflected. The starting point of this unfolding is the unity of the mind, and its first exemplar is the number.<sup>17</sup> The number is always the compound of the same and the other. The unfolding of conjectural art necessarily supposes identity and otherness as shown by Cusanus with *Figura P* or *Figura Paradigmatica*.<sup>18</sup> In this *Figura*, the *unitas* pyramid, whose base is light, is completely imbricated with the *alteritas* pyramid whose base is darkness or nothingness. The world created entitatively by God and even God himself become assimilated (that is, made similar to the form of the human mind) in the numbering of identity and otherness. The real world descends or unfolds from the unity of the divine mind towards multiplicity and, at the same time, ascends or returns from this multiplicity toward the unity that gave rise to it; likewise, the conjectural world unfolds from the unity of the human mind and returns to it. Thus, for man, contact with reality is always and inevitably mediated by the symbolic, that is, by his own art.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Imbach (2019: 384-385).

<sup>16</sup> Expositio I, Praeambulum C, p.62: "Igitur in sumptione talis universalis principii ex sensibilibus experimentis non est nisi quaedam *coniecturalis* illatio sub ratione veri et non sub ratione talis entis secundum praemissa, et ideo solum accipitur ut creditum, non ut intellectum vel scitum, et, ut dictum est, sumitur *secundum quandam coniecturam*, cum firmo tamen et indeclinabili assensu rationis." (Italics: CD).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. De coni I c.2 (h III n.XXX).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. De coni. I c.9 (h III n.41-42).

<sup>19</sup> André (1997).

Conjectural art allows the human mind to know itself as an image. This implies, in turn, only conjectural knowledge of the absolute, since the image remains a created image and not an eternal one. And it is at this point that Christian sources gravitate by proximity or opposition.

In “De docta ignorantia” III, Cusanus addresses the issue of human nature based on the Christological theme, arguing that the nature of humanity is given in Christ not as a species or genus but as a singular man who reaches the perfection of his species in its singularity.<sup>20</sup> This argument is criticized by John Wenck in his “De ignota litteratura” of 1442. The Heidelberg theologian misunderstands Cusanus and points to the identification of Jesus Christ with a singular man as an error. But, in doing so Wenck does not follow the approach laid out by Cusanus, who later clarifies this point in the defense written in his “Apologia doctae ignorantiae”.

In the answer to the fourth conclusion, Cusanus firmly declares that it is not possible to identify the perfect image, which is the Son in the Word, with what he calls the “*imago diminuta*”, that is, the human being.<sup>21</sup> One might ask what it means for Cusanus to consider an image “diminished”. The answer will point to the condition of the created image. The human being is not a perfect image. He was created *ad imaginem et similitudo*. Precisely at this point, Cusanus separates himself from the thought of Eckhart.<sup>22</sup> This condition of the “created image” that all human beings share unifies their operation: all minds unfold themselves numerically, and, in this unfolding, they come to know themselves. This unfolding constitutes the *regio humanitatis* or the human world in which the mind embraces everything with its human potency: from the lower material creature to God himself. In the potency of humanity, everything exists in its own way: e.g., a human world, or a human god.<sup>23</sup> Certainly, there is here a new formulation of another classic topic: man as a microcosm. If man can be called so, it is not only

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. De doct ign III.

<sup>21</sup> Apol. doct. ign. (h II n.45): “Ecce, aiebat praeceptor, quomodo id quod secundum Paulum de unigenito Filio, qui est imago consubstantialis Patri, excipitur, ille falsarius asserit de omni imagine diminuta positum.”

<sup>22</sup> Cf. D’Amico (2020).

<sup>23</sup> De con. II c.14 (h III n.143): “Humanitatis igitur unitas cum humanaliter contracta existat, omnia secundum hanc contractionis naturam complicare videtur. Ambit enim virtus unitatis eius universa atque ipsa intra suae regionis terminos adeo coërcet, ut nihil omnium eius aufugiat potentiam. Quoniam omnia sensu aut ratione aut intellectu coniecturatur attingi atque has virtutes in sua unitate complicari dum conspicit, se ad omnia humaniter progredi posse supponit. Homo enim deus est, sed non absolute, quoniam homo; humanus est igitur deus. Homo etiam mundus est, sed non contracte omnia, quoniam homo. Est igitur homo microcosmos aut humanus quidem mundus. Regio igitur ipsa humanitatis deum atque universum mundum humanali sua potentia ambit. Potest igitur homo esse humanus deus atque, ut deus, humaniter potest esse humanus angelus, humana bestia, humanus leo aut ursus aut aliud quodcumque. Intra enim humanitatis potentiam omnia suo existunt modo.”

because his nature brings together the lower and the higher, the corporeal and the spiritual, but because everything that his mind touches can become human.<sup>24</sup>

However, the human condition of created being makes each mind radically singular. Without innate content, the modes of actualization of the potency of the mind will be as multiple and varied as the number of minds that there are. For this reason, Cusanus distinguishes not only between conjectures but also between those who conjecture: those who are limited to confused sensibility, those whose reason works based on principles, and those whose operation is intellectual.<sup>25</sup> The differences among various peoples who conjecture are also conditioned by certain external attributes such as body conformation, customs, and geography. Although Cusanus presents a hierarchical order that follows the unities corresponding to the intellect, reason, and sensibility, the differences among peoples are not exclusive or elitist: the nature of a single species is communicated or participated in all peoples in a variety of ways.<sup>26</sup> Those peoples who have cultivated the intellect (such as, Cusanus suggests, the southern ones like the Egyptians and the Indians) are those who have attained the truth in otherness in more subtle ways. Nevertheless, this does not detract from those who cultivated the rational arts of the *trivium* or those who were dedicated to law like the Greeks and Latins. Nor does he rule out that an approximation of the truth can be attained in the way by which those of the north (who are more dedicated to the mechanical arts<sup>27</sup>) achieve it. In order to emphasize that Cusanus' consideration does not disqualify certain conjectures or privilege others who conjecture in a better way, it suffices to recall the appreciation of sensible experimentation that Cusanus performs in the dialogues of the "Idiota".

There, the "ignorant man" or layman demonstrates the operations that are carried out in the market (measuring, numbering, weighing), and, in doing so, provides sensible material in which to seek out the principle of their sensible operations, which is to be grasped with the rational mind. However, he does not try to

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Dupré (1978: 68-87); André (1999: 7-30); D'Amico (2015: 81-92).

<sup>25</sup> De coni. II c.9 (h III n.117): "[...] ita quidem sunt coniecturantes differentes, ut quidam in confusa sensibilitate discurrant, quidam ex principiis ratiocinentur, quidam intellectualibus absolutionibus vacent."

<sup>26</sup> De coni. II c.15 (h III n.150): "Potes etiam omnium huius mundi incolarum varietatem in complexione, figuris, vitiis et moribus, subtilitate et grossitie coniecturaliter venari constituendo universorum circulum incolarum horizontem septemtrionem, meridiem, orientem et occidentem intercipientem, in ips<o> meridiem altiorem et septemtrionem inferiorem, in medio medium mundi statuendo. Est igitur a septemtrione ad meridiem ascensus humanae speciei et de meridie versus septemtrionem descensus [...] Hinc etiam in Indianis atque Aegypti regionibus religio intellectualis atque abstractae mathematicae artes praevaluere, in Graecia et apud Afros et Romanos dialectica, rhetorica atque legales scientiae viguerunt, in aliis septemtrionioribus sensibiles mechanicae artes. Omnes tamen regiones in his omnibus suo quodam modo peritos habere necesse est, ut sit una unius speciei natura in omnibus varie participare."

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Yamaki in this volume.

make his interlocutors abandon sensible operations but rather tries to encourage them to notice the ascending order of its foundation. In his final “Idiota” dialogue, “De staticis experimentis”, Cusanus gives a prominent place to the so-called “mechanical” arts, demonstrating how mechanical experimentation can lead to an enigmatic construction of truth. In this way, the crudity of art is an adequate instrument for a kind of knowledge of truth, *in speculo et aenigmate*, as C. M. Bacher has recently stated, or in a kind of experimental mysticism.<sup>28</sup>

However, the differences among types of conjecture and also those who conjecture cannot only be generic or specific but must be considered in all cases from the point of view of singularity. This singularity presents in a particular way not only the genus and the species but also the family itself and the geographical space to which it belongs. The notion of singularity is clarified in Cusanus’ thought from the notion of contraction, one of the most decisive features of his ontology.

In “De docta ignorantia” II, Cusanus shows that contraction (*contractio*) is the way in which the unity of plurality is presented at each level of diversity. The universe is called the “maximum contraction”, because it is the principle of *one* that makes the plural, plural. It is not about a hypostatized unit but rather a sort of general genus that while residing in the particular does not subsist as being separated from it. This allows him to affirm that “all is in all and each is in each”. Cusanus’ doctrine of genera and species is understood in the same terms and is applied to the case of the human being. “Animality” or “rationality” reside in each man but in a contracted manner, precisely in the exclusive form of his singularity. The contraction is present in each of its various degrees and in each way. This gradation is only “in act” in the singular.<sup>29</sup>

This perspective will have consequences in the Christological approach of the third book, as we have observed above, since Christ is conceived humanly as a singular that coincides with the perfection of the species precisely because of his hypostatic union with the divine nature. However, the rest of humanity only contracts the species in its singularity in an always perfectible way.

“De coniecturis” in some way supposes and completes this doctrine of the contraction from “De docta ignorantia” and exemplifies it in the so-called *Figura Uniuersorum (Figura U)*, in which the *regio humanitatis* is located. The figure shows the three regions of contraction.<sup>30</sup> God, since He belongs to the sphere of the uncontracted and non-figurable, does not appear in any of the figures, yet He is found covering the entire figure since God communicates or participates in the otherness that is represented. The figures, therefore, represent the theophany or *apparitio dei*. In this sense, S. Mancini has proposed “De coniecturis” as a

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<sup>28</sup> Bacher (2015).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. De doct. ign. II c.6 (h I nn.123-126).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. De coni. I c.13 (h III n.65).

kind of fourth book of “De docta ignorantia”, in which a different and, at the same time, convergent perspective is presented: it completes, in some way, the latter in the key reading of theophany.<sup>31</sup> The example of light and color, recurrent in Cusanus’ writings, appears to clarify the role that humanity plays. If light is to be by itself imparticipable but participates or communicates in otherness, appearing in multiplicity, then the *regio humanitatis* is to be the color by which this participation is possible. The place of each man is the entire circle of the universe: the higher or intellectual region, the middle or rational, and the lowest or sensible.

### 3. Giuliano and the Others

Nicholas of Cusa dedicates “De docta ignorantia” and “De coniecturis” to his friend, Cardinal Giuliano Cesarini. In the former, Cusanus excuses his *barbaras ineptias*, stating that as a German he has a special way of reasoning the divine;<sup>32</sup> in the final chapter of the latter, Cusanus boldly asks the cardinal to know himself. Cusanus not only wants Giuliano to discover the region of humanity – that is to say, to draw an anthropology – but he also forces the cardinal to ask himself about his own place in *Figura U*.<sup>33</sup> This interpellation, which opens the chapter “De sui cognitione”, asks Giuliano to be certain about the following: “do not doubt that you are a singular man!”<sup>34</sup> Again, the issue of singularity is brought to the fore. This phrase can be understood as “discover who you are”, that is, a human being, but also as “discover who you are”, that is, Giuliano.

As R. Nuñez Poblete has argued, the decisive theme of singularity is shown in “De coniecturis” in a particular way. Using contemporary terms, he affirms that the ascending concordance that reason constructs is not achieved without the irreducible difference of singularity between the “real object” and the “intentional object”.<sup>35</sup> So, the path of interiorization imposed by Cusanus is different from that of Proclus: it is not about the encounter of an eidetic world that resides in the soul but rather about encountering a completely “humanized” intentional world and, in Giuliano’s case, “Julianized”.

In fact, the discovery of oneself is carried out in the action of conjecturing, and this action, as we have seen, is always singular in that each one sees himself

<sup>31</sup> Mancini (2006: 199-222).

<sup>32</sup> De doct. ign. I, prologus (h I n.1).

<sup>33</sup> De coni. II c.17 (h III n.172): “Ita quidem, Iuliane, pari passu si lucem divinitatem, colorem humanitatem, visibilem mundum universum ipsius feceris, te ipsum in figura inquire et an de suprema, media aut infima regione existas inspicito.”

<sup>34</sup> De coni. II c.17 (h III n.171): “Primo quidem, Iuliane pater, te hominem unum esse non dubitas.” Trans. by Hopkins, slightly modified.

<sup>35</sup> Nuñez Poblete (2015: 162).

in a gradation of concentric circles. The gradation of the circles of contraction that Cusanus encourages Giuliano to discover is concentric: the circle of human beings, that of Italians, that of Latins, that of Romans, that of Caesarians, in which is found, among others, himself. However, this discovery is not possible without putting into play the concordances and differences with the rest of the human beings: in the case of contracted beings, the singularity always implies confrontation with the other.<sup>36</sup>

This conjecture will necessarily bring into play a proportional or numerical knowledge by which each one is measured in relation to other men. This game between identity and otherness, or identity constructed by relative opposition, continues to the exhortation of the beginning. Cusanus declares Giuliano's singularity and his relational character at the same time insofar as humanity participates in otherness. And the "others" to which he refers are not only the rest of mankind but the entirety of living beings.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, Cusanus' guide or *manuductio* leads Giuliano through an exercise so that he can see that he participates singularly in the imparticipable light. If this imparticipable light is a uni-triunity constituted by unity, equality, and connection, its participated image must necessarily be discovered as relational in a double sense.

First of all, if this image is similar to a Trinitarian exemplar, then its operation is also necessarily Trinitarian: just as from the absolute unity of the divine mind comes the multitude (*multitudo*), from its equality comes inequality (*inaequalitas*), and from its connection comes division (*divisio*), so, too, from the human mind comes the multitude, the magnitude, and the composition.<sup>38</sup> This necessarily affects its way of building the world, and that way is numerical: only the number, the first exemplar of the human mind, gives order and harmony to entities. By recognizing its participation in the Trinity, each human being knows in

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<sup>36</sup> De coni. II c.3 (h III n.89): "Quod si ad discretiores concordantias pergere instituis, circulum contractissimum in universalem resolvito atque ita intueberis te universaliter cum universis convenire hominibus, generaliter vero cum his, quos quantum clima intercipit, specialius vero cum ad occasum declinantibus, specialissime autem cum Italicis. Adhuc hunc contractissimum circulum in universalem resolvito et conspicias te universaliter cum Italicis convenire, generaliter cum Latinis, specialius cum Romanis, specialissime vero cum Caesariis, unde ortum cepisti. Haec quidem omnia in singulis quibuscumque ex traditis principiis veriori coniectura per differentiae et concordantiae gradus attinges."

<sup>37</sup> De coni. II c.17 (h III n.171): "Humanitatem autem unitatem quandam in alteritate clare concipis, cum me quidem hominem atque alium a te atque singulis conspicias individuis. Humanitatem vero individualiter in alteritate contrahibilem alteritatem absolutioris esse unitatis in ipsius et leoninitatis et equinitatis alteritate advertis."

<sup>38</sup> De coni. I c.1 (h III n.6): "Sola enim ratio multitudinis, magnitudinis ac compositionis mensura est."

himself that all things also participate variously in this exemplar, and from this he forms (*elicire*) from himself the order of all things.<sup>39</sup>

However, and secondly, the fact that the human being was created in the image and likeness of a Trinitarian principle gives him a being that is only defined by relation. If we return to *Figura U*, Cusanus will say that light permeates the three regions, but it is only realized maximally in the intellectual region, where not only unity is participated but also equality and connection. As in the Trinitarian exemplar, none of these aspects is understood without the other: participation in unity (in which equality and connection inhere) is given as an intellectual virtue; in equality (in which unity and connection inhere) as justice, and in connection (in which unity and equality inhere) as love.

This maximum participation of the intellectual region is *deiformitas*, or the possibility of becoming more divine (*divinior*) by the similarity of image, not identity.<sup>40</sup>

#### 4. Final Remarks

In several passages in which it is possible to identify the clear influence of Augustine of Hippo and Bonaventure, Cusanus affirms that each human being may discover in himself that he is *similitudo dei*. This implies that the triune constitution shines through in him: unity, equality and connection. The unity of knowledge begets in him equality and the spirit of justice as well as the connection between them, i.e., love. However, this is not presented as an abstraction but as the case of each particular individual, with explicit ethical consequences. Cusanus understands the idea of “justice” according to the famous golden rule: “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. Only in this does the principle of equality shine through. As H. Schwaetzer<sup>41</sup> has shown, in order to live in accordance with justice, it is necessary not to deviate from Cusanus’ definition of equality, in which there is unity and connection among people. Cusanus concludes “De coniecturis” by emphasizing equality as a formal principle that governs all ethics.

Self-knowledge necessarily leads to the exercise of this principle of equality among human beings, relating one to another by love in its own particular and non-transferable way. The more we harmoniously increase our participation in knowing, being just, and loving (similarly to the Trinitarian unity), the more we become godlike. However, as P. Pico Estrada<sup>42</sup> has pointed out, this path starts from *conservatio sui*, from the conservation of one’s own nature, in which the

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<sup>39</sup> De coni. II c.17 (h III n.180).

<sup>40</sup> De coni. II c.17 (h III n.174).

<sup>41</sup> Schwaetzer (2004: 126-135).

<sup>42</sup> Pico Estrada (2012).

encounter with others is unavoidable: our humanity is naturally open to others, even prior to our empirical encounter with others.

The maxim “know thyself” is thus necessarily relational but not, then, reduced only to self-perception in relation to the *first* principle. The *regio humanitatis* is not the region of humanity understood as an eidetic universal or transcendental subject but as the set of human beings, who, seeing themselves as radically singular in their conjectural artistic reconstructions of the world, inexorably recognize themselves and others in their relationships.

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