

Introduction

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Introduction

For the first time in Italy the “Jungcusaner Tagung” took place at the Università degli studi “Gabriele d’Annunzio” di Chieti-Pescara, between the 21st and 23rd September 2016. This is a biennial meeting aimed at young PhD students and researchers interested in the historical figure Nicolaus Cusanus and his philosophical and theological thought.

In its seventh edition, the Tagung represents a traditional event in Cusanian research, particularly within German scholarship. It is found in the first and second volumes of *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie*, published in 2019.

The Tagung dealt with textual commentary, the study of sources and the later reception of the three dialogues of the *Idiot* (*De sapientia*, *De mente* and *De staticis experimentis*) written by Nicolaus Cusanus during the summer of the 1450, while he was in Italy, in the cities of Rome, Rieti and Fabriano.

The texts are written in the form of a dialogue among three characters: the *Idiot*, who is a ‘pauper’¹, a lowly and uneducated man², who had not studied literature³ like the humanist *Orator*⁴, nor has a background in the Peripatetic philosophy taught in universities, like the *Philosopher*⁵.

¹ *De sap.* I, no. 1, 3.

² The common thread of the whole book is the movement between the two poles of Knowledge of the world and divine Knowledge: *De sap.* I, no. 4, 3; cf. *De quaer. Deum*, c. 3, no. 41, 4; *De gen.*, c.4, no. 175, 5sq. This opposition, between the ‘false’ knowledge of books and the ‘true’ knowledge of the unique book written by God, which is the world, certainly has Pauline references, see for example I Cor. 3:19. The opposite of the *Idiot* is the learned man, regarding whom cf. *De mente*, c. 11, no. 52, 10.

³ *De sap.* I, no. 3, 6: “litterarum studio”. On the opposition between *litteratus* and *illiteratus* cf. KÖNIG-PRALONG, Catharine: *Le bon usage des savoirs. Scolastique, philosophie et politique culturelle*. Paris: Vrin 2011, 29–35. Cf. IMBACH, Ruedi: *Dante, la philosophie et les laics* (= *Vestigia* 21). Fribourg: Éditions universitaires 1996, 10s.

⁴ The translations of the Latin world ‘*Orator*’ in modern languages reveal the different interpretations of the figure described by Cusanus. For instance, Giovanni Santinello mentions an ‘*Orator*’; similarly Maurice De Gandillac mentions an ‘*Orateur*’ and Bohnenstädt a ‘*Redner*’, whereas Menzel-Rogner and Scharpff mention a ‘*Gelehrte*’. Santinello believes that by ‘*Oratore*’ Cusanus meant the classical rhetorician, as opposed to the *Idiot* who is ignorant with regard to the cultural renovation of the fifteenth century. Other interpretations consider the *Orator* to be a specific figure of the Italian humanists, a man of literature whom Cusanus personally met in Rome in 1450.

⁵ Regarding the relation between Cusanus and the university philosophy cf. FIAMMA, Andrea: *Nicola Cusano da Colonia a Roma (1425–1450). Università, politica e umanesimo nel giovane Cusano* (= *Texte und Studien zur Europäischen Geistesgeschichte. Reihe B* 19). Münster: Aschendorff Verlag 2019.

Nicolaus Cusanus introduces the figure of the *Idiot* as that of a special ‘teacher’, who, trained by his own ignorance, debates with both the *Orator* and the *Philosopher* with the aim of bringing Knowledge to the fore through dialogue. As though he were a “Socrate cristiano”⁶, the *Idiot* critically considers and reworks the positions of both humanists and professors, proposing his own philosophy inspired by Dionysius the Areopagite.

For the *Idiot*, this philosophy is the real pedagogical alternative to both the failure of university teaching and the sectarianism of Italian Humanistic Schools⁷: its own habitat is found in the unrest of the secular world at that time, in the dynamism of artisans and workshops as well as in the involvement of Italian *Comuni* in civil politics. It represents a practical and experiential model of knowledge in keeping with the times⁸.

The three books of the *Idiot*, sometimes considered individually, had variable success during the course of the modern era. *De staticis experimentis* was already taken out of the collection in the sixteenth century and partly echoed in alchemic and proto-scientific writings, while the first book of *De sapientia* was copied in the second half of the fifteenth century under the title of *De vera sapientia* and was attributed to Francesco Petrarch. Only by the end of the nineteenth century was Nicolaus Cusanus’s authorship recognized.

In the same period, the three books of the *Idiot* started to be considered as one, as they had been originally created, especially following the dissemination of the historiographical Neo-Kantian thesis in Germany. According to this thesis, it was possible to detect the philosophical foundations of modern science in these three dialogues.

The recent progress in Cusanian studies has enabled an appreciation of the richness of suggestions which the *Idiot* offers to the history of philosophy, mathematics and science, as well as to the interpretation of intel-

⁶ FLASCH, Kurt: *Niccolò Cusano. Lezioni introduttive a un’analisi genetica del suo pensiero*, tr. it. by T. Cavallo. Torino: Arago 2011, 202–207. He points out that the same name ‘Apologia’ closely resembles the homonymous text by Plato in defence of Socrates. Cf. *De sap.* II, no. 1ss: in the first part of the booklet Cusanus’ criticism of dialectics and Aristotelianism is outlined: he instead favours the negative theology of Dionysius.

⁷ Cusanus defines Dionysius as “Dionysius, theologorum maximus” (*De non aliud* no. 54, 2); “sapientissimus Philo” (*Apol.* no. 21, 4); “maximus ille divinorum scrutator Dionysius Aripagites” (*De docta ign.* I, c. 16, no. 43, 7); “divinus vir” (*De ber.* no. 11, 14); “divinus Dionisius” (*Apol.* no. 13, 8).

⁸ Knowledge is not limited to universities nor humanistic circles, conversely it “clamat in plateis”, cf. *De sap.* I, no. 3, 11. Cf. *De apice theor.* no. 5, 2. FLASCH: *Niccolò Cusano*, 198, points out that Cusanus wrote the *Idiot* in the months after he was appointed Cardinal and in the same period when his friend, the humanist Tommaso Perentucelli, was elected to the papal throne; moreover, Flasch maintains that Cusanus was also aware of the political dimension of his writing. In fact, he points out, albeit subtly, that Cusanus was at that time using the translation of Dionysius’s work by Ambrogio Traversari and given to him by the young Tommaso Parentucelli. Cf. BLUM, P.R.: *Nikolaus von Kues und die Italienische Renaissance* (= Trierer Cusanus Lecture 18). Trier: Paulinus Verlag 2015, 21.

lectual history in the fifteenth century. The Tagung of Chieti aimed to bring these areas once again to light and, moreover, take stock of recently published studies.

The essays presented here and in the next issue of the magazine are organized thematically: this volume contains the presentations of the participants of the Tagung which concern the epistemological and scientific aspects emerging from the *Idiot*, whereas the next volume contains essays on metaphysical and theological matters.

During the presentations, a novelty emerged; namely, the extensive presence of 'medieval' sources in these writings; in particular, Platonism is present in *De sapientia*, Scotism in *De mente*, while Alchemic influences are found in *De staticis experimentis*. Particular attention is devoted to the metaphysical doctrine of ways of being and to the mathematical-philosophical notion of infinity.

Furthermore, many articles question the historiographical Neo-Kantian theory, according to which the *Idiot* represents a privileged text attesting to Cusanus's break with previous tradition.

Other articles focus on the structure of the dialogues present in the *Idiot*, paying attention to the Cusanian strategy of exhibiting a philosophical dialogue where the main character, the *Idiot*, is not presented as a magister, nor as Cusanus's voice, but as a character in dialogue with others.

This technique of using dialogue was also employed by Cusanus in other contexts, for instance in *De visione Dei*, where he describes the dialogue among the monks who were sent to observe the symbol of Christ, or in *De pace fidei*, where the model of knowledge proposed by the *Idiot* is applied in an interreligious context.

A further aspect which emerged during these works concerns the link between Cusanus's philosophical writings and his activities as a preacher. Some articles, indeed, show how it is possible to follow the development of Cusanus's thinking by reading the *Idiot* in parallel with the sermons given during the 1440s in Germany, as papal legate, and those from the 1450s, mostly in Bressanone, where he was appointed bishop by Pope Nicholas V.

Some articles have also evaluated the *Idiot's* fortune among Cusanus's contemporaries, such as Leon Battista Alberti, and in modern philosophy, particularly in Montaigne's *Essays*, with the aim of shedding light on the wide-spread dissemination of Cusanian works—especially *De sapientia*—in French culture. Lastly, the *Idiot* is put to the test by contemporary philosophies of authors such as Heinrich Barth, Jacques Derrida and Jos Decorte.