
Between idle chatter and the pursuit of wisdom. The idea of philosophy in the thought of Nicholas of Cusa

*Entre la charla ociosa y la búsqueda de la sabiduría.
La idea de filosofía en el pensamiento de Nicolás de Cusa*

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Abstract: Nicholas of Cusa wrote about philosophy with reserve, even some dislike, and defined it as idle chatter and earthly knowledge that leads to excessive pride. On the other hand, he associated philosophy with the most important human task, i.e. the pursuit of truth. The objective of this paper is to explain this disparity in the understanding of philosophy by means of a distinction between knowledge and wisdom. Analyzing passages from selected works by Nicholas of Cusa, the paper presents Cusanus' concept of wisdom and emphasizes its Christocentric character and the close relationship between wisdom and immortality.

Keywords: Nicholas of Cusa, philosophy, Christology, sermons, immortality, *De veneratione sapientiae*.

Resumen: Nicolás de Cusa escribió sobre filosofía con reserva, incluso con cierta aversión, y la definió como charla inútil y conocimiento terrenal que conduce al orgullo excesivo. Por otro lado, asoció la filosofía con la tarea humana más importante, es decir, la búsqueda de la verdad. El objetivo de este trabajo es explicar esta disparidad en la comprensión de la filosofía mediante una distinción entre conocimiento y sabiduría. Analizando pasajes de obras seleccionadas de Nicolás de Cusa, el artículo presenta el concepto de sabiduría del Cusano y enfatiza su carácter cristocéntrico y la estrecha relación entre sabiduría e inmortalidad.

Palabras clave: Nicolás de Cusa, filosofía, cristología, sermones, inmortalidad, *De veneratione sapientiae*.

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1. INTRODUCTION

When the Orator from the dialogue *Idiota de mente* (1450) by Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64) meets the Philosopher, he recognizes him “from the paleness of his face, from his long toga, and from other marks indicating the serious demeanor of a thoughtful man”¹. A touch of irony in the description of the Philosopher’s appearance, distinguishing him from other inhabitants of Rome, shows Cusanus’ reserved attitude towards representatives of philosophy. In fact, the subsequent part of the dialogue proves that true wisdom is expressed by an uneducated layman, an “idiot,” a craftsman from “a certain small, underground dwelling,”² searching for wisdom like Socrates.

Nicholas of Cusa often writes with distrust and sometimes even distinct reserve and aversion to philosophy. Paradoxically, this sentiment is expressed by someone who himself is featured in textbooks of fifteenth-century philosophy, whose thought is studied at faculties of philosophy at universities, and whose concepts about the world and mind are discussed by professional philosophers.

However, it would be wrong to conclude that Cusanus’ attitude to philosophy is unequivocally critical. In philosophy, he also sees a path to wisdom that is a goal of human life. Thus, it is easy to notice a certain incongruity in Cusanus’ concept of philosophy. On the one hand, it is a means of finding truth but, on the other hand, it is a wrong path. It seems that this dichotomy results from the double meaning ascribed by Cusanus to this term. He regards philosophy as a theoretical discipline, a way of attaining the truth, or even as the striving for truth itself, a discovery of the need to find wisdom, and participation in Divine light. However, philosophy is a somewhat distorted way of achieving this goal, which can be observed at universities of the day where truth and wisdom are

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1. NICOLAUS DE CUSA, *Idiota de mente*, h V, 51,8-9; h – *Nicolai de Cusa Opera omnia iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita* (Meiner, Leipzig, 1932-1944, Hamburg, 1959-2014). Trans. J. HOPKINS, *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge* (The Arthur J. Banning Press, Minneapolis, 1996) 533.
 2. *Ibidem*, 54,2-3. Trans. J. Hopkins cit., 534.

obscured due to the cognitive limitations of human beings, particularly their pride and obtuseness.

This paper examines the dichotomy of how Nicholas of Cusa understood philosophy. It stems from the belief that metaphysical issues are the basis for understanding all of Cusanus' thought which, after all, is an example of outstanding fifteenth-century philosophy. Cusanus' concept of philosophy is based on his key ideas concerning not only human cognition but also the relationship between unity and multiplicity, human destiny, Christ's place in the world, and kinds of immortality.

2. *Philosophia, scilicet terrena scientia*

Cusanus' criticism of philosophy as an academic discipline results from the fact that he sees in it various threats which, under the pretext of guiding people towards wisdom, actually move them away from it. These threats include the multiplicity of views leading to confusion and uncertainty, the inherent limitations of reason and its inability to comprehend spiritual matters, and excessive pride to which philosophers surrender.

a) Multiplicity

Cusanus regards the history of philosophy as a multitude of diverse views difficult to reconcile with each other and demonstrating the variability inherent in the human condition. Philosophy thus practiced cannot attain wisdom which belongs to the sphere of unity.

This conclusion is stated in Sermon XLIII *Alleluia. Dies sanctificatus* (1444), for example³. The sermon tells the story of the biblical downfall of man, interpreted by the author as an allegorical image of an attempt to reach God by means of supernatural knowledge. However, since the life of the spirit comes from grace rather than knowledge, people fail in their endeavors. This downfall is symbolized by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The tree of

3. *Sermo XLIII*, h XVII/2, 4,5-15; 5,1-14.

life represents the forfeited life in God. In their search of this tree, people reach the Egyptian forest. In the multitude of trees, however, they are unable to find what they search for. The forest symbolizes the multiplicity of doctrines professed by philosophers who “construct various gods and various trees of life, for themselves, each one according to his own view”⁴. Thus, philosophy has a subjective character. It is about constructing (*fabricare*) rather than learning about the objective order of the world. It is characterized by multiplicity and variability that bring neither peace nor answers to the questions asked. In the biblical image of the exodus from Egypt into the desert, i.e. the abandonment of earthly science (*humanae scientiae*) for the sake of Divine teaching, Cusanus sees the liberation from this uncertainty. Using theological rhetoric, he says that it is a transitional stage during which people do not yet experience the life of grace but from which they can move on to resting in God, which is conveyed by the image of the land of milk and honey.

Objections raised against philosophy lead to the conclusion that it is a human activity and has nothing to do with Divine teaching. Just like one cannot compare the Son of God with human sons, one cannot compare the teachings of Christ with the teachings of philosophers⁵. All that is necessary and useful can be found in the Gospel while the teachings of philosophers are empty, vain and devoid of the spirit that can give life and happiness. Real cognition is ensured only by the living faith through love⁶.

b) Limitations of reason

Philosophy is not a path to wisdom as long as it is regarded as an academic discipline subordinated to the *ratio* principle. This suspicious philosophy is confined in the rigid framework of logic, limits itself to things conceived with reason only, and thus distorts reality.

4. “Philosophi enim in silva habitant habentes pluralitatem et varietatem opinionum, varios sibi deos et varias vitae arbores fabricantes, unusquis que prout sibi videtur,” *ibidem*, 5,6-9. Author’s translation.

5. *Sermo CLXXXVII*, h XVIII/4, 16,3-9.

6. Cf. *Sermo XXV*, h XVI/4, 3,5-10; *Sermo CLXVIII*, h XVIII/3, 6,19-26.

Thus, Nicholas of Cusa expressly distances himself from how his contemporaries understood philosophy as an academic discipline pursued as part of university studies and based primarily on Aristotelian thought. However, this distance does not only result from his personal experiences but is also based on the anthropological assumptions he adopted. Arriving at the truth lies beyond the competence of reason because it operates only in the world of the laws of logic. However, such laws do not apply in the reality based on the concept of the coincidence of opposites adopted by Cusanus.

This conflict is exemplified in the debate between Cusanus and Johann Wenck (d. 1460), rector of the University of Heidelberg. Wenck, in his *De ignota litteratura* (1442-1443), accused the author of *De docta ignorantia* (1440) of rejecting the principle of non-contradiction and risking heresy due to the lack of differentiation between the Persons of the Holy Trinity as well as between God and creation. In Cusanus' response included in *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* (1449), it is proved that, while the principle of non-contradiction applies to finite beings, it does not apply to the infinite simplicity of God.

Thus, the defense of the idea of learned ignorance in *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* is also a polemic with philosophers who are unable to comprehend this idea. In this respect, Cusanus draws analogies with accusations made by Sophists against Socrates. After all, the awareness of one's ignorance is a starting point of any true philosophy. The human reason is not able to grasp certain truths, and ignoring this fact leads to misguided and feigned philosophy that Nicholas of Cusa challenges. Mystical theology is the answer to the limitations of human reason. People look for the summit of knowledge but it is reserved just for God, and the soul of itself does not know anything⁷.

In *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, Cusanus levels particular criticism at Aristotelians. Johann Wenck is even presented as an embodiment of an Aristotelian philosopher confined by his assumptions to which he has become so accustomed that he cannot abandon them: "For this speculation will surely conquer all the modes of reasoning of all

7. *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, h II, 4,3.17-20.

the philosophers, although it is difficult to leave behind things to which we are accustomed”⁸. Habit (*consuetudo*) is a major weakness of professional philosophers who become so accustomed to certain ways of reasoning that they cannot see the truth: “For so great is the strength of long-established observance that many people’s lives are erased sooner than their customs”⁹. Learned ignorance is an experience, a certain *visio*. People who close themselves to such an experience and merely trust the authority of others are not able to comprehend it.

Cusanus’ criticism of Aristotelianism has an essentially polemical character and stems from the fact that a major line of criticism made by Wenck in *De ignota litteratura* is based on the accusation that Cusanus, due to deficiencies in his education, does not know and does not understand Aristotle, and if he were familiar with Aristotle’s main works, he would understand that *docta ignorantia* is based on false premises¹⁰. Cusanus does not mince his words when he responds to these accusations:

But the Aristotelian sect now prevails. This sect regards as heresy [the method of] the coincidence of opposites. [...] Hence, this method (*via*), which is completely tasteless to those nourished in this sect, is pushed far from them, as being contrary to their undertaking. Hence, it would be comparable to a miracle—just as it would be the transformation of the sect—for them to reject Aristotle and to leap higher¹¹.

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8. “Vincet enim indubie haec speculatio omnes omnium philosophorum ratiocinandi modos, licet difficile sit consueta relinquere,” *ibidem*, 55,36.8-9. Trans. J. HOPKINS, *Nicholas of Cusa’s Debate with John Wenck: A Translation and an Appraisal of De Ignota Litteratura and Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* (The Arthur J. Banning Press, Minneapolis, 1988) 485.
 9. “Nam tanta est vis longaevae observantiae, quod citius vita multorum evellitur quam consuetudo,” *ibidem*, 7,6.3-4. Trans. J. HOPKINS, *Nicholas of Cusa’s Debate* cit., 462.
 10. JOHN WENCK, *On Unknown Learning (De ignota litteratura)*, in J. HOPKINS, *Nicholas of Cusa’s Debate* cit., 427. Cf. K. M. ZIEBART, *Nicolaus Cusanus on Faith and the Intellect: A Case Study in 15th-Century Fides-Ratio Controversy* (Brill, Leiden, 2014) 81-84.
 11. “Unde, cum nunc Aristotelica secta praevaleat, quae haeresim putat esse oppositorum coincidentiam, in cuius admissione est initium ascensus in mysticam

On the other hand, as Meredith Ziebart indicates, in his defense of learned ignorance, Cusanus proves that this doctrine does not destroy and is not even against Aristotelian logic¹². In fact, *Apologia* defends the rational status of learned ignorance¹³. This is not about a mystical irrationalism but about understanding the principles governing our mind which are inconceivable in and of themselves. Learned ignorance is the conclusion of the thinking process. Wenck does not distinguish between *intellectus* and *ratio*, and does not appreciate the distinct character of the former. But reason cannot grasp its governing principle because it rejects the principle of coincidence of opposites. Thus, Aristotelian logic is not erroneous in itself even though one should add that the Stagirite's philosophy was rather distant from the intuitions of Cusanus and, in many aspects, this tradition was simply foreign to Cusanus¹⁴, which, of course, does not mean that he did not draw from Aristotle¹⁵.

c) Pride

Based on the threats outlined above, Nicholas of Cusa develops an ethical argument against philosophy. *Philosophia mundana*, this failed attempt to put the ideal of searching for wisdom into practice is subverted by human pride that gives primacy to reason¹⁶.

theologiam, in ea secta nutritis haec via penitus insipida quasi propositi contraria ab eis procul pellitur, ut sit miraculo simile – sicuti sectae mutatio – reiecto Aristotele eos altius transilire,” *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, h II, 7, 6.7-12. Cf. *ibidem*, 31,21.7-12. Trans. J. HOPKINS, *Nicholas of Cusa's Debate* cit., 463.

12. K. M. ZIEBART, *Nicolaus Cusanus* cit., 102.

13. *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, h II, 16,12.9-13; cf. K. M. ZIEBART, *Nicolaus Cusanus* cit., 98-99.

14. E.g. *De beryllo*, h XI/1, 40,1-10; 42,1-18.

15. Sermon CXCIX, for example, proves how intensively Aristotle was read and studied by Cusanus. W. A. EULER, K. REINHARDT, H. SCHWAETZER, commentary to: NIKOLAUS VON KUES, *Predigten in deutscher Übersetzung*, Bd. 3 (Aschendorff, Münster, 2007) 519. About the relation between Cusanus and Aristotle see also: J. MAASSEN, *Metaphysik und Möglichkeitsbegriff bei Aristoteles und Nikolaus von Kues. Eine historisch-systematische Untersuchung* (Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 2015).

16. In *Sermo VI*, Cusanus distinguishes between pride (*superbia*) and vainglory (*vana gloria*). The former refers to internal while the latter to external aspects (24,5-6). In the context of philosophers' pride, Cusanus writes about *vana gloria*.

Philosophers who trust the competence of their reason too much are thus susceptible to pride. They look for wisdom for their own glory. Therefore, they must remember their primary goal—Divine glory—so as not to drown in vanity.

A starting point for the criticism of philosophers' pride is a quote from the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians about knowledge that feeds pride¹⁷. This quote appears as a reminiscence in *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, among other works:

But the knowledge which is exercised for disputing is knowledge which looks for a victory of words and which is puffed up. It is far removed from the knowledge which approaches God, who is our peace. Hence, since [our adversary] proposes to hold a dispute—[a dispute] arising out of his knowledge—he could not conceal what kind of knowledge this was. For that which puffs up and arouses to conflict manifests itself—[showing] that it is not (as is learned ignorance) knowledge which, by means of rest, tends toward mental seeing¹⁸.

Cusanus directs his criticism against knowledge that relies on verbal victories. He juxtaposes the excess of words with rest, peace and quiet that mystical theology brings along. For there can be two kinds of knowledge. One kind of knowledge can incite conflicts and focus on itself. *Terrena scientia* is the philosophy that leads to pride¹⁹. On the other hand, knowledge can also lead to an intellectual vision through rest and peace. Then, this *scientia divina* represents learned ignorance (*docta ignorantia*), often described as wisdom (*sapientia*)²⁰.

17. Cf. 1 Cor. 8:1.

18. "Scientia autem, quae est in exercitio ad configendum, illa est, quae victoriam verborum exspectat et inflatur, et longe abest ab illa, quae ad Deum, qui est pax nostra, properat. Unde, cum configere ex sua scientia proponat, qualis sit illa, occultare nequivit. Id enim, quod inflat et ad conflictum excitat, seipsum prodit: eam scilicet non esse scientiam, quae per vacationem in mentis visionem tendit, qualis est docta ignorantia," *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, h II, 10,7.28-8.6. Trans. J. HOPKINS, *Nicholas of Cusa: Metaphysical Speculations* (The Arthur J. Banning Press, Minneapolis, 1998) 464.

19. *Sermo CCLXV*, h XIX/5 16,6-8.

20. Klaus Jacobi defines Cusanus' *scientia* as a kind of knowledge where wisdom is

Philosophers are also the subject of Sermon CLXXXVII *Spiritus autem Paraclitus* (1455) where their attitude is defined by two aspects: cognitive and ethical. A philosopher is “a lover of wisdom” who pursues it in a cognitive process leading from sensory to intelligible things. This cognitive process is assisted by a moral attitude that makes one ignore transient values, renounce carnal desires, and choose incorruptible values, first and foremost, immortal virtues²¹. This description of a philosopher is merely an introduction to the criticism where the main accusation is against excessive pride. The knowledge of Divine glory, granted to philosophers through speculation, obliges them to show reverence to God, which they fail to do because they are preoccupied with their own glory, “as if on their own they would have come to a knowledge of the truth”²². Instead of wisdom, they find knowledge (*scientia*) and vainglory. The quote from the Epistle of Paul to the Romans describes them adequately: “they, who claimed to be so wise, turned fools”²³. Their biblical model is Adam who reached for the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in order to be like God through knowledge. The reference to the Book of Genesis indicates that the seemingly useful pursuit of the truth can eventually lead to downfall. This intellectual failure results from choosing the wrong path to which Cusanus refers as *scientia*. Although it does constitute a kind of knowledge, it primarily

perceived in otherness (*alteritas*), finite as finite, different as different. *Sapientia*, on the other hand, is an absolute, non-different examination of truth. According to Jacobi, it is possible to combine both methods in Man-God, who is *veritas ipsa*. What *scientia* represents is not a different truth than that contemplated by *sapientia* since the former is “different” while the latter is “non-different”. *Ratio* must be instructed by *intellectus* about its own tasks. K. JACOBI, *Die Methode der Cusanischen Philosophie* (Karl Alber Verlag, München, 1969) 238-40.

21. *Sermo CLXXXVII*, h XVIII/4, 11,7-13. Cf. *Sermo CXCLII B*, h XVIII/5, 2,3-4.
22. “Sed quamvis Deus per sensibilia et visibilia illis manifestasset gloriam suam magnam, ipsi tamen non glorificaverunt Deum quasi eis manifestasset illa in laudem gloriae suae, sed praevaluerunt in vanitatibus suis gloriam propriam quaerentes, ac si ex se ipsis ad veritatem cognoscendam pervenissent,” *Sermo CLXXXVII* 11,14-20. Trans. J. HOPKINS, *Nicholas of Cusa’s Didactic Sermons: A Selection* (The Arthur J. Banning Press, Minneapolis, 2008) 138.
23. Rom. 1:22.

shows ignorance about God²⁴. Thus, Sermon CLXXXVII turns out to be an argument with the Stoic concept of happiness. For happiness (*felicitas*) is a gift from God rather than a product of one's effort, pursuit of virtue, or intellectual effort. In order to bring the desired results, the human pursuit of happiness must absolutely refer to God, which Cusanus illustrates with the image of the veneration of Divine glory²⁵.

The criticism of pride to which earthly philosophy leads can also be found in Sermon CCLXVII *Simile est regnum caelorum* (1457) where Cusanus conducts an exegesis of the Parable of the Tares. The author interprets the weed sown by Satan as a conviction that one can believe only in rational truths. The starting point for Nicholas of Cusa is a specific anthropological concept encapsulated in the image of the human soul as a field created by God. Even the most fertile field will not produce a yield on its own. Similarly, a human soul is unable to achieve its goal, i.e. Divine sonship, on its own. Just like a field is sown with grain, the soul needs spiritual grain, i.e. Divine wisdom. The soul accepts it *per medium intellectus*, and this wisdom comes from Christ who, being God and Man, is the only one who can give such wisdom enabling the divinization of humans²⁶.

In his interpretation of the Parable of the Tares, Cusanus highlights the image of excess (in the image of oversowing – *superseminatio*) and division (*divisio*)²⁷. God's creation is perfect, and that which has been added to it is the work of Satan. The goal of evil is to turn people away from what is good. Such an excess in the context of religion are heresies that mislead people while appealing to reason²⁸. Similarly, philosophy, though good in itself, becomes

24. Cf. *Sermo XLIII*, h XVII/2, 4,15-17.

25. *Sermo CLXXXVII*, h XVIII/4, 11,20-39.

26. *Sermo CCLXVII*, h XIX/5, 15,19.

27. The image of the weeds that imitate wheat, i.e. wisdom, also appears in sermon CCXVII: "Licet enim videantur esse sapientes iniusti et peccatores, tamen in veritate non sunt, sicut zizania non est triticum. <Spiritus enim vitae> non est in ipsis; licet appareant sapientes, similes tamen sunt 'sepulcris dealbatis,'" h XIX/2, 8,8-13.

28. *Sermo CCLXVII*, h XIX/5, 21,15-17.

degenerated where tendencies for excess occur. Empty talk (*vaniloquium*) is such an excess. Just like weeds do not let the grain grow, the garrulousness of philosophers gives truth little opportunity to grow; instead, truth is replaced by disputes, divisions and vanity. Satan sowed human speculation (*adinventiones*) among the Divine grains representing wisdom and truth. Yet again Cusanus uses a prefix (*ad-*, *super-*) that means ‘adding something’ and changes the valuation of a given term to a negative one. *Seminatio* (the sowing of grain) is God’s action while *superseminatio* is the perverse action of Satan. *Inventio* is the domain of similarity between humans and God but *adinventiones* represent destructive human speculation²⁹. Real wisdom personified by Christ is nothing less and nothing more than equality. All excess leads to monstrosity³⁰.

Vaniloquium, however, is a symptom of error rather than its cause which Cusanus sees in pride resulting from the belief in the superior role of reason: “[nothing] is believed unless it is understood. [It is] as if nothing were true except that which man’s intellect undoubtingly apprehends”³¹. This pride among philosophers is exemplified by Averroes who ridiculed Moses, Jesus and even Muhammad. Philosophers and heretics conduct themselves according to the same principle. They seemingly accept Divine teaching but they add their own fallacy and deceit to it. In this context, Nicholas of Cusa makes one of the strongest statements:

I fear that the tradition of men—i.e., of the liberal arts and of the laws of the forum—is an instrument not only by means of which Satan busies men so that they do not give themselves over to relishing the word of God but also by means of which [good] seeds are sown over with tares, which detract from the simplicity of faith and which hamper the fruit of faith. Not without reason were these subject-matters (*scientiae*) detestable

29. *Humanas adinventiones* inspired by the evil spirit are also mentioned in *Sermo CCLXV*, h XIX/5, 17,6-8.

30. *De docta ignorantia*, h I, 17.11-12. See also: E. F. RICE, *Nicholas of Cusa’s Idea of Wisdom*, “Traditio” XIII (1957) 350.

31. *Sermo CCLXVII*, h XIX/5, 21,26-28.

to true Christians from the beginning; but now, when the fervor of faith is waning, they are more appealing [to many] than is the Gospel³².

There are two aspects of the problems with human knowledge, based on liberal arts in the Middle Ages. First, it takes up the time necessary to worship God, and distracts human attention and, as Cusanus writes, taste. Divine glory does not taste so good when someone is constantly preoccupied with earthly matters. Second, human knowledge is similar to the weeds sown amongst the grains of wheat. It disturbs the simplicity of faith and thus inhibits its growth, remaining in the domain of multiplicity, changeability and variation.

Drawing on the anti-dialectic tradition, Cusanus reminds us that learning has been detested by Christians right from the start (“these subject-matters [were] detestable to true Christians from the beginning”). Of course, it was obvious in the past when the zeal of the faithful was greater. At present, when the fervor of faith weakened, learning begins to attract increasing interest. Interestingly, it seems that in this passage Cusanus deliberately does not make a distinction between learning and heresy, as if the principle of error was the same for both. Just like heresy falsifies beliefs about faith, learning falsifies beliefs about the world.

The passage quoted from Sermon CCLXVII sums up particularly clearly Cusanus’ aversion to philosophy where traces of *devotio moderna* anti-intellectualism can be found³³. Knowledge, including philosophy, can be harmful because it diverts people from their real goal and leads to excessive pride. This is, however, just a warning against the abuse of the characteristic human thirst for knowledge. It is difficult to label Nicholas of Cusa as an anti-intellectualist

32. “Timeo quod traditio hominum, liberalium scilicet artium et iurium fori, sit instrumentum, per quod Satan non solum occupat homines, ne se dent ad verbi Dei saporem, sed sint superseminata semina zizania, quae simplicitatem fidei et eius fructum impediunt; non sine causa hae scientiae a principio fuerunt veris christianis abominabiles et modo evangelio sapidiore fervore Dei tepescente,” *ibidem*, 22,7-15. Trans. J. HOPKINS, *Nicholas of Cusa’s Last Sermons (1457-1463)* (The Arthur J. Banning Press, Minneapolis, 2011) 88-89.

33. Cf. THOMAS A KEMPIS, *De imitatione Christi*, I, 2, 1-2 (Londini, 1867).

because he also regards philosophy as a path to wisdom.

3. PHILOSOPHARI, QUOD VENATIONEM SAPIENTIAE VOVO

When writing about Cusanus' understanding of philosophy, one cannot avoid the question about his idea of wisdom. One can even say that the meta-subject matter of philosophy is discussed by Cusanus as a digression from his discussion of wisdom which constitutes one of his key topics. Thanks to its reference to wisdom, philosophy acquires extraordinary dignity. One can even propose a thesis that philosophy is the most important task that people have to complete in the world. It is the noblest of all human occupations because other disciplines operate in a world of signs and not things in themselves (*sensibilia*, not *intelligibilia*)³⁴. Through signs, they also indicate the intelligible world but at the same time they distort its image, like a mirror giving a "dark" reflection of things³⁵.

a) *Foretaste*

Wisdom is the goal towards which people strive but this is only thanks to the fact that they already have a premonition of what this wisdom is. Cusanus describes this premonition by means of sensory metaphors and calls it foretaste (*praegustatio*). Cusanus developed the concept of *praegustatio* in his dialogue *Idiota de sapientia* (1450) where he explains it by means of several metaphors depicting an infant reaching for milk, or iron attracted by a magnet³⁶. In his letter from 12 February 1454 to Kaspar Aindorffer, Cusanus writes about a hunting dog which needs to have some preliminary knowledge of what a hare is before the hunt begins³⁷. *Praegustatio* is common to

34. *De filiatione Dei*, h IV, 60,11-14.

35. Cf. 1 Cor. 13:12a.

36. Id., *Idiota de sapientia*, h V, 15,13-14; 16,10-18. See P. M. WATTS, *Nicolaus Cusanus: A Fifteenth-Century Vision of Man* (Brill, Leiden, 1982) 128-29. For the concept of wisdom in *Idiota de sapientia*, see also: M. L. FUEHRER, *Wisdom and Eloquence in Nicholas of Cusa's Idiota de sapientia and de mente*, "Vivarium" XVI/2 (1978) 142-55.

37. See R. HAUBST, *Die Christologie des Nikolaus von Kues* (Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau, 1956) 54.

all people and thanks to this, Cusanus can look for a common goal in various philosophical views.

While the desire for knowledge is a foretaste, wisdom itself is spiritual nourishment (*pabulum sapientiae*), a concept that is closely linked to the aspect of life and immortality of the intellect.

For Infinite Wisdom is our life's unfailing nourishment. From this nourishment our [intellectual] spirit—which can love only wisdom and truth—lives eternally. For every intellect desires to exist. Its existing is its being alive; its being alive is its understanding; its understanding is its being nourished by wisdom and truth³⁸.

Just like physical nourishment keeps the body alive, wisdom also does not allow the intellect to die. Thus, the pursuit of wisdom is almost organically linked to the striving for immortality and happiness³⁹.

Another aspect of wisdom stemming from the concept of *prae-gustatio* is its experiential character. It is evident in *Idiota de sapientia* where the sense of hearing is juxtaposed with the sense of taste: “no one tastes [Wisdom] through hearing but he alone [tastes it] who receives it in terms of an inner tasting”⁴⁰. Wisdom cannot be attained through listening, i.e. by means of obedience to authorities. It should be experienced, or tasted, in accordance with the etymology of the term *sapientia* which originates from the term *sapere* ‘to taste’⁴¹.

38. “Sapientia enim infinita est indeficiens vitae pabulum, de quo aeternaliter vivit spiritus noster, qui non nisi sapientiam et veritatem amare potest. Omnis enim intellectus appetit esse. Suum esse est vivere, suum vivere est intelligere, suum intelligere est pasci sapientia et veritate,” *Idiota de sapientia*, h V, 12,15-13,2. Trans. J. HOPKINS, *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom* cit., 503.

39. *Ibidem*, 15,1-9.

40. “Ita de hac sapientia, quam nemo gustat per auditum, sed solum ille, qui eam accipit in interno gustu,” *ibidem*, 19,5-6. Trans. J. HOPKINS, *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom* cit., 506.

41. H. G. SENGEL, *Griechisches und biblisch-patristisches Erbe im cusanischen Weisheitsbegriff*, “Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft” 20 (1992) 151.

Cusanus discusses the subject of wisdom, also in the context of the Greek philosophical tradition, in *De venatione sapientiae* as well. Already in the opening passage he defines philosophizing as the pursuit of wisdom⁴². This work was inspired by the biographies of philosophers, *De vitis philosophorum*, compiled by Diogenes Laërtius. Cusanus saw Greek philosophy in its entirety. In *De pace fidei*, he seeks the unity of religion in the multitude of rites (“una religio in rituum varietate”⁴³). *De venatione sapientiae*, on the other hand, is an attempt at finding the unity in the multiplicity of philosophical doctrines (“una sapientia in philosophorum varietate”⁴⁴), and various concepts of Cusanus (“unus Cusanus in operum varietate”⁴⁵), as well as looking for the conformity of philosophers with the Bible⁴⁶.

The concept of wisdom is connected with a unique anthropological perspective developed by Cusanus in, for example, Sermon CXXXV *Gaudete et exsultate* (1453)⁴⁷. Humans were created as capable of wisdom, which Cusanus expresses through the image of a human being as a board which reflects wisdom⁴⁸. All things are enfolded in God’s reason, and the wisdom in people was created to resemble Divine wisdom⁴⁹. It is exemplified by a painter who paints an image of an individual according to his notion and thus shares the art of painting with his subject. Therefore, human beings, with their innate pursuit of wisdom, seek their origins, the model, that of which they were born and that they resemble.

42. *De venatione sapientiae*, h XII, 1,20-21.

43. *De pace fidei*, h VII, 6,7.10-11.

44. Cf. “sapientia in variis formis varie recepta,” *Idiota de sapientia*, h V, 25,12.

45. Helmut Meinhardt’s phrasing: H. MEINHARDT, *Das Geheimnis des Todes und der Auferstehung Jesu Christi nach Cusanus, ineins damit sein Verständnis der Auferstehung der Toten*, “Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft” 23 (1996) 72.

46. See G. SANTINELLO, *Weisheit und Wissenschaft im cusanischen Verständnis – Ihre Einheit und Unterschiedenheit*, “Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft” 20 (1992) 65.

47. *Sermo CXXXV*, h XVIII/1, 4,1-19.

48. *Ibidem*, 4,5-8. It is also the subject of *Sermo CCLI Nos revelata facie* that presents an image of a painter creating a self-portrait using his own reflection.

49. Cf. *Idiota de mente*, h V, 85,7-8. See also: E. F. RICE, *Nicholas of Cusa’s Idea of Wisdom* cit., 352.

Wisdom is thus a power of the omnipotent and infinite mind. All that exists is enfolded (*complicare*) in this mind that is the efficient cause of all things. This short analysis of wisdom in Sermon CXXXV shows the inefficacy of philosophers' efforts who pursue wisdom but begin this pursuit the wrong way, by starting with the examination of things and asking about their reason (*ratio rerum*). However, by starting from the finite they run the risk of not finding the cause because it lies beyond the innate nature of things, it is God Himself. Cusanus, on the other hand, proposes starting from eternal Wisdom that, as *ratio* and *causa*, comprises everything. To know means to learn about things in their cause. If God is the cause of everything, to know means to learn the world in relation to God. Philosophy that does not relate to God thus cannot exist because it is purposeless and ineffective.

b) Christ

For Nicholas of Cusa Christ as Logos and Sapientia is the ultimate goal of philosophy as well as the goal of every pursuit and the answer to every question posed by people. Christ is not only the goal of Christian philosophy; He is the unrealized goal and axis of pagan philosophy, too. For Christ is what Platonists and other philosophers call the Intellect⁵⁰.

The strong association of wisdom with Christ has biblical roots⁵¹. In Sermon CLXIII *Quasi myrrha electa* (1454), Cusanus indicates a passage from Sirach 24:5, saying that wisdom is the first-born of all creatures; that is why it has been associated with Logos⁵². For wisdom is also what is known as *ratio*, *verbum*, *Deum de Deo*, *Deum creatorem a Patre primo Deo*⁵³. It is also worth noting the creative aspect of Wisdom that, as the Divine Logos, participated in the creation of the world.

50. *De venatione sapientiae*, h XII, 24,1-3.

51. On sapiential Christology in the thought of Nicholas of Cusa, see K. REINHARDT, *Christus – 'Wort und Weisheit' Gottes*, "Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft" 20 (1992) 68-97.

52. *Sermo CLXIII*, h XVIII/3, 2,12-14.

53. *Ibidem*, 3,3-6.

In another sermon, CCLXXIV *Loquimini ad petram coram eis* (1457), Cusanus presents the idea of Christ-Wisdom using the metaphor of the well, referring to a passage from the Gospel of St. John⁵⁴. In the pericope about the meeting of Jesus and a Samaritan woman, He sits by the well. Thus, Cusanus writes that water is in the well and the water of wisdom by the well⁵⁵. Water is a symbol of wisdom because, like water, it quenches thirst: physical thirst on the one hand, and the thirst for wisdom on the other. This thirst stems from love (*caritas*) of eternal truth, inherent in the intellect.

If water is wisdom, philosophy is the well, i.e. the way of extracting this wisdom. The task of philosophy is to search and find, to make an effort similar to that of digging a well. It involves the laborious investigation of sensual things⁵⁶. It is worth noting that in Cusanus' works, philosophy is often described as a kind of effort, as opposed to the ease with which truth can be reached thanks to grace. This thought is elaborated in the verse from John 4:11, where the Samaritan woman is surprised that Jesus has no vessel to draw water from the well. For human beings can obtain the water only by means of a vessel. Cusanus interprets this image in relation to science. Nobody can become a scholar without effort: "no one is made knowledgeable unless he laboriously draws from a deep well (i.e., from the Scriptures) in which liquid is hidden"⁵⁷. Jesus does not reply to the question about where He draws wisdom from (i.e. water in this image). In His case, this question is irrelevant because He is the beginning of wisdom and draws it from Himself rather than from any external source. He Himself is the well of wisdom, surpassing all knowledge represented by the well of wisdom from which philosophers drink⁵⁸.

54. John 4:1-42. About that sermon, see E. F. RICE, *Nicholas of Cusa's Idea of Wisdom* cit., 357.

55. *Sermo CCLXXIV*, h XIX/6, 6,9-10. Cf. *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, h II, 4,3.9-11.

56. *Sermo CCLXXIV*, h XIX/6, 7,3-4.

57. "Sicut nemo efficitur doctus, nisi laboriose hauriat in profundo puteo, ex scripturis scilicet, in quibus latet latex," *ibidem*, 12,9-11. Trans. J. Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Last Sermons* cit., 172.

58. *Ibidem*, 7,10-20.

The special role of Christ-Wisdom stems from the fact of incarnation. By bringing together Divine and human nature, He is the perfect man realizing the maximum capacity of human nature. This is where the *christiformitas* principle stems from: since everything in Christ is to the highest degree, the natural way to satisfy all human yearnings and ambitions is to be like Christ. This motif appears, for example, in Sermon CCXCII *Iam autem die festo mediante* (1459), where Christ is found in every perfection desired by people. He is the “living speech” to those who want to speak languages. To those striving for knowledge, He is the living wisdom. To those seeking rational life, He is rationality in itself⁵⁹.

The motif of *christiformitas* in the context of wisdom also appears in the following words in Sermon CCLXV *Plenitudo legis est dilectio* (1457): “this is true Wisdom, namely, to know Christ”⁶⁰. Since those who know Christ have the knowledge of all things, whatever they might be, they do not need anything else. In Him, all the treasures of wisdom and ability are hidden⁶¹. Cusanus precedes these statements with an outline of his Christology: Christ is fullness because He combines visible (created) things with invisible things (non-created, eternal God). He is above everything because He is the Word of God through which all things were created. He is the image of God and a form of Divine substance. Everything that can be said about the relation of God and the world concerns Christ because creation is in Him and He is in God the Father. Things in their true, eternal nature are enfolded in Christ. In this context, the emptiness of human knowledge is exposed. Although knowledge often approximates truth, it will never actually attain it because it is based on elements from this world, not on Christ. Since everything, the entire wisdom and fullness, is in Him, partial knowledge is useless. These statements are summed up in the following quote from the Epistle to the Colossians: “Take care not to let anyone cheat you with his philosophizings, with empty phantasies drawn from human tradition”⁶².

59. *Sermo CCXCII*, h XIX/7, 3,6-31. Cf. R. HAUBST, *Die Christologie* cit., 309-10.

60. *Sermo CCLXV*, h XIX/5, 15,1-2. See also *ibid.* 7,20-26.

61. Cf. Col. 2:3.

62. Col. 2:8. Cf. *Sermo CCLXV*, h XIX/5, 16,6-9.

Cusanus uses Christiform anthropology as the basis for his concept of philosophy in Sermon CCLXII *Obtulerunt ei munera* (1457). Invoking a passage in the Apocalypse, he studies words referring to Christ, calling Him the bright morning star⁶³. Searching for the meaning of this biblical expression, Nicholas of Cusa builds an analogy between visible and intellectual light. Thus, Christ is a star but it is a special star such as the Sun in the sky. Although it shines similarly to other heavenly bodies, its brightness is incomparably greater. The case is similar in the life of the intellect. In every individual using their reason, there is a power that can be compared to a star: it is the innate light of reason. It gives light, i.e. understanding, that shows the way to the goal, i.e. the source of the light, the intellectual sun—Christ. Thus reason leads to the source of light and source of life. Cusanus sums up these observations with a conclusion that this is how philosophers look for light in the fount by means of their innate light⁶⁴. For this is the principle of the existence of philosophy: it flows from an innate human disposition but this innate disposition has a supernatural character because it directs people towards Christ.

The Christological aspect of the idea of wisdom stems from Cusanus' belief in the superior role of Christ in the world. *Doctrina Christi* envelops all other doctrines in itself. Christianity is thus a superior philosophy comprising all the others: "Hence, if you rightly discern, [you see that] Christ's instruction is a perfection that enfolds all instruction; for it is instruction about the reason for which God made the world"⁶⁵. It is so because the truth about the ultimate reason that all philosophers search for has been expressed in *doctrina Christi*.

A practical example of the agreement between various philosophies and Christianity is the formation of the world: while its

63. *Sermo CCLXII*, h XIX/5, 18,1-19,14. Cf. Apoc. 22:16.

64. *Sermo CCLXII*, h XIX/5, 19,13-14.

65. "Unde si recte inspicias, doctrina Christi est perfectio omnem doctrinam complicans, nam est doctrina illius rationis, <per quam Deus fecit et saecula>," *Sermo CCLIV*, h XIX/4, 30,5-8. Trans. J. HOPKINS, *Nicholas of Cusa's Didactic Sermons* cit., 326.

prime mover has been given different names by various philosophers, they all had in mind the same thing, as Cusanus argues in Chapter 9 of *De venatione sapientiae*, entitled “Sacred Scripture and the philosophers have named in different ways [one and] the same thing.” Nicholas of Cusa starts with the description of creation in the Book of Genesis that he interprets in the context of his term ‘the possibility-of-being-made’ (*posse fieri*). Things move from *posse fieri* to actualization. This takes place thanks to the Word of God as well as in a natural way because the transition from possibility to actualization is a natural step. The Word of God, through which nature creates everything, is God⁶⁶.

Further in the chapter, Cusanus shows how various philosophers described the Word that is God. Thus Platonists called it the Creator-Intellect, the Lord of all things as well as the Only Begotten since it comes from the One. Anaxagoras referred to it as the mind, the Stoics as the word. Then Cusanus, based on Diogenes Laërtius, conducts a short review of philosophical views on the formation of the world, summing it up with the conclusion that they do not differ from his own belief “that God, who is purest Actuality, makes all things from the possibility-of-being-made”⁶⁷.

c) *Immortality*

A Christological interpretation of wisdom permeates *De venatione sapientiae*. In this work, Cusanus also indicates how the subject of wisdom is closely linked with the question of immortality. It seems that Nicholas of Cusa was partial to this idea, also for personal reasons. *De venatione sapientiae* is one of his last works and constitutes a kind of a philosophical testament featuring the subject of death and transitoriness⁶⁸. Things that exist but are not everything that they could be are never permanent and disappear. They imitate eternal things but will never reach them. That is why one should turn to eternity.

66. NICOLAUS DE CUSA, *De venatione sapientiae*, h XII, 23,20-22.

67. “Deum, qui purissimus actus, ex posse fieri omnia facere,” *ibidem*, 25,2.

68. *Ibidem*, 8,1-20.

And the path to eternity is wisdom, which frees our mind from death even though it cannot give freedom from bodily death. Here some scholars studying Cusanus write about the concept of two kinds of wisdom, one of which is supposed to be the wisdom of philosophers while the other is the wisdom of Christ⁶⁹. The first kind of wisdom is supposed to ensure immortality of the mind, as Plato understood it, while the other is supposed to have the power of overcoming bodily death as well, in accordance with the Christian dogma of resurrection. Chapter 32 of *De venatione* is the key to this interpretation.

The discovery of the mystery of Christ takes place in the field of order. The Highest Wisdom, as a creative force, established order in all things in order to manifest itself this way. Therefore, “the orderliness of the universe is the first and very precise image of eternal and incorruptible Wisdom”⁷⁰. In this peaceful and very beautiful universe, Wisdom has assigned a special place to man who is a microcosm and the connecting bond of the universe.⁷¹ Humans have been placed among the highest sensual and the lowest intelligible things, at the intersection of what is temporary and eternal. Thanks to the mind, human beings are capable of uniting with God and Immortal Wisdom. This capacity of the human spirit to unite with immortal things does not get extinguished by the mortality of animal nature.

The subject of the immortality of the mind, based on Neoplatonic assumptions, frequently appears in Cusanus’ works. This immortality is based on the pursuit of the truth. If this pursuit is abandoned, the intellect condemns itself to spiritual death⁷². For truth and wisdom are the life of the intellect as well as its nourishment that ensures immortality⁷³.

69. K. FLASCH, *Nikolaus von Kues. Geschichte einer Entwicklung. Vorlesungen zur Einführung in seine Philosophie* (Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1998) 604; H. G. Senger and R. Klibansky leave this question open: H. G. SENER, R. KLIBANSKY, *Praefatio editorum*, in *De venatione sapientiae*, h XII, X.

70. “Est igitur ordo universi prima et praecisior imago aeternae et incorruptibilis sapientiae,” *De venatione sapientiae*, h XII, 95,6-7. Trans. J. HOPKINS, *Nicholas of Cusa: Metaphysical Speculations* cit., 1337.

71. *Ibidem*, 95,9. Cf. id., *De docta ignorantia*, h I, 198,126.29-127.6.

72. *Ibidem*, 241, 150.5-13.

73. *De filiatione Dei*, h IV, 57,11; *Idiota de sapientia*, h V, 12,15-17. Cf. J. WOLTER, *Aparitio Dei. Der Theophanische Charakter der Schöpfung nach Nikolaus von Kues*

However, true wisdom, discovered in Christ, has much more to offer. Not only can the intellect remain immortal, also after the death of the body, but even the body itself can be resurrected⁷⁴. Nature can be elevated to the immortality of the spirit. This takes place by the power of the Word of God, incarnated in the Man Jesus Christ. Christ unites not only lower and higher nature, the temporary and the eternal, as it happens in every human being, but also God the Creator and creature. For every human to be able to benefit from this union, resulting in the elevation of mortal nature to immortal nature, they must become like Christ the intercessor.

We desire wisdom in order to be immortal. But since no wisdom frees us from this lifetime's horrible bodily death, true wisdom will be wisdom through which that necessity of dying is made into a virtue and will be wisdom which becomes for us a sure and safe passage unto the resurrection of life. This [passage] happens only by the power of Jesus and only for those who remain steadfastly on His pathway⁷⁵.

In the fields of pursuit of wisdom, Wisdom Incarnate has established, by its own example, its own pathway that the deceased takes to reach resurrection. We desire wisdom to become immortal. Although no

(Aschendorff, Münster, 2004) 38-39.

74. The subject of the rising from the dead appears in Chapter 1 of Book One of *De docta ignorantia*, e.g. "induit igitur in Christo humana natura immortalitatem," 142,22-23. Ulli Roth writes that Cusanus develops the concept according to which human nature was changed after the resurrection of Christ, and it became immortal. U. ROTH, *Suchende Vernunft. Der Glaubensbegriff des Nicolaus Cusanus* (Aschendorff, Münster, 2000) 110-111. See also: *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft*, Bd. 23: K. KREMER, K. REINHARDT (eds.), *Unsterblichkeit und Eschatologie im Denken des Nikolaus von Kues. Akten des Symposions in Trier vom 19. bis 21. Oktober 1995* (Paulinus, Trier, 1996); K. H. KANDLER, *Nikolaus von Kues. Denker zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit* (Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1995) 96.
75. "Appetimus sapientiam, ut simus immortales. Sed cum nulla sapientia nos liberet ab hac sensibili et horribili morte, vera erit sapientia, per quam necessitas illa moriendi vertitur in virtutem et fiat nobis certum <iter> et securum ad resurrectionem vitae; quod solum viam Iesu tenentibus et eius virtute continget," *De venatione sapientiae*, h XII, 96,11-19. Trans. J. HOPKINS, *Nicholas of Cusa: Metaphysical Speculations* cit., 1339. Cf. *Cribratio Alkorani*, h VIII, 231,8-10.

wisdom can free us from the necessity of physical death, true wisdom ensures the passage to resurrection. It can be achieved only by clinging to the power and the path of Jesus. Immortality is the goal of the pursuit of wisdom.

Cusanus' concept of wisdom is just one of the points that show how Christocentric his thought is. All his works, as intended by him, are guides leading towards wisdom. However, for Cusanus, wisdom is not an abstract notion but has a personal character. It is wisdom incarnate—*sapientia incarnata*. Thus, the desire for wisdom that is innate to all people can be satisfied only in Christ. Even more so, the human desire for wisdom stems from the fact that only wisdom can give immortality to humans. It is simply a biological yearning of the animal nature of human beings—to remain alive. However, mortality can be overcome only through the union with the only man who has conquered death. This union can be accomplished through good and love as well as wisdom because Christ—the second Adam, the perfect realization of human nature—is Divine Wisdom, the second Person of the Trinity, and the creative power of God at the same time.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The desire for wisdom, innate to all people, was also shared by Nicholas of Cusa who searched for wisdom in many of his works. Although he wrote ambiguously about it, philosophy became his path to wisdom. He could see how philosophers have betrayed the philosopher's ideal and limited themselves to futile investigation in the pursuit of their own fame. According to Cusanus, this typically human realization of the yearning for wisdom led to the degeneration of human thought and its distortion in unnecessary, purely theoretical speculation.

Fortunately, there also exists *vera philosophia*, already present in ancient thinkers, and elaborated by Christian authors in what Cusanus refers to as *vera theologia*. Its source, common to pagans and Christians, is Christ—wisdom incarnate. It is surprising how Christocentric the thought of Cusanus is. For Nicholas of Cusa,

Christ is the conclusion of the whole world and also the ultimate point of reference for philosophy. He is both its beginning and end. For He is the wisdom that philosophers search for and the light that enables them to formulate their statements.

In Cusanus' idea of this wisdom, strong emphasis is put on the aspect of immortality because it is the wisdom of immortality⁷⁶. Wisdom is the spiritual food for the intellect, protecting it from spiritual death, just like bodily food prevents the body from starving to death. The wisdom found in Christ can achieve much more, however; it can overcome bodily death. Thus, people engage in philosophy, i.e. the pursuit of wisdom, to become immortal⁷⁷.

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76. *Idiota de sapientia*, h V, 17,11.

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