

Truth and Its Method:

Beyond the Limits of Reason in Nicholas of Cusa's *De Docta Ignorantia*

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Introduction

In this paper, I claim that Nicholas of Cusa, in his work *De Docta Ignorantia*,¹ holds that truth is infinite, transcendent, and indivisible, such that the intellect apprehends this absolute truth through its proximal truth as a finite reflection of the absolute truth. As infinite, truth is without bounds and is above, i.e., transcendent, to the sensuous world, and, without bounds, it is one, hence it is indivisible. Truth, the Infinite, the One, and so on, are names for God, such that God is truth.² Hence, the concept of truth is a concept of God. This paper will explicate the concept of God in a limited way to investigate God as truth. Regarding truth, “truth is not something more or something less but is something indivisible.”³ On this basis, Cusanus compares truth to necessity and intellect to possibility, in that, the intellect can itself always approximate truth to a lesser or greater degree.⁴ The basis on which Cusanus develops this concept of truth and the relation of the intellect is his, what I term, the *illustrative method*, in the specific inscribed polygon illustration.⁵ The illustrative method is how the intellect is led to apprehend the infinite in an ineffable manner. This method itself is based on the condition of learned ignorance. Learned ignorance is a double entendre. On the one hand, we learn that we are ignorant, and, on the other, we learn that we attain the highest knowing in our ignorance.⁶ I understand this double meaning of learned ignorance to mean to learn that seeking (absolute) truth through reason is futile, as, by our nature, we are ignorant of the (absolute) truth, and that

¹ Nicholas of Cusa and Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance: A Translation and an Appraisal of De Docta Ignorantia*, Original title: *De Docta Ignorantia* (1440), trans. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis, Mn: Arthur J. Benning Press, 1990). Hereafter referred to as DI, with reference to the book number (I, II, III) when quoting from the translated text and the paragraph number used in Jasper Hopkin’s translation. For remarks made by Jasper Hopkins, the citations will follow the schema of DI and the page, and, when relevant, the footnote.

² DI III, 263.

³ DI I, 10.

⁴ DI I, 10.

⁵ DI I, 9-10.

⁶ DI I, 4.

path to attain (absolute) truth is to seek the ineffable, which itself further demonstrates our lack of access to the absolute truth. To argue for my interpretation of learned ignorance, the illustrative method, and Cusanus' concept of truth, this paper will engage in a systematic reading of Cusanus' *De Docta Ignorantia*. First, I will investigate learned ignorance, subsequently clarifying our intellect nature regarding the desire for truth, psychology, and the limits of reason. Second, I will show how the illustrative method dovetails with learned ignorance, in that it brings about the apprehension of the infinite, through the intellect. Third, I will take up Cusanus' discussion of truth through his illustration of the inscribed polygon, wherein truth and the intellect are shown to be connected.

Learned Ignorance

Absolute truth is not attained with reason, with comparing things to each other and with our ideas of them, but in going beyond the limits of reason in the pure intellect, the non-discursive cognition. Cusanus demonstrates this in book one chapter one.⁷ We can break Cusanus' demonstration into two parts: 1) showing the limits of reason,⁸ and 2) locating truth within us.⁹ Corresponding to these two parts are the two meanings of learned ignorance. Learned ignorance as *learning that one is ignorant* means that we have learned that reason is limited, and that truth is not to be found with its use. Additionally, learned ignorance as *being educated* means that truth is to be found in being ignorance, insofar as ignorance is the acceptance that reason is not the path of truth. To argue for my interpretation of learned ignorance, I will go through the details of book one chapter one of *De Docta Ignorantia*. This investigation breaks

⁷ DI I, 2-4.

⁸ DI I, 2-3.

⁹ DI I, 4.

into three subordinate matters: A) the desire for truth and our nature, B) Cusanus' psychology, and C) truth and ignorance.

A. The Desire for Truth

Cusanus' demonstration of the limits of reason, as to prove that we are ignorant, has its conception origin in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in connection with Aristotle's claim that man has a desire to know, and based on this thesis, Cusanus demonstrates the limits of reason insofar as the knowledge attained by reason does not satisfy the desire for truth. In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle says, "all men by nature desire to know."¹⁰ Cusanus begins with a similar premise in a less succinct manner. Cusanus states, "we see that by the gift of God there is present in all things a natural desire to exist in the best manner in which the condition of each thing's nature permits this."¹¹ This discussion of the gift has two moments: (1) the gift and (2) our seeing of the presences of the gift. The gift is "a natural desire [in all things] to exist in the best manner in which the condition of each things' nature permits this."¹² Our nature is intellectual such that a man is his intellect.¹³ Our intellect, however, is finite.¹⁴ Hence, *our* "natural desire"¹⁵ is connected with our finite intellectual nature and shows itself as the desire to know the truth. As Cusanus says, "[an] intellect knows to be true that which it insatiably desire to attain [...] that which is apprehended in its affectionate embrace."¹⁶ What is recognized as truth is that which is desired, and it is the intellect that recognizes the truth as truth. Further, as finite intellect, we seek the truth in a finite

¹⁰ Aristotle, Richard McKeon, and W. D. Ross. "Metaphysica." Essay. In *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, 689–934. Trans: W. D. Ross. New York, NY: Modern Library, 2001.

¹¹ DI I, 2.

¹² DI I, 2. brackets added by author

¹³ DI III, 205.

¹⁴ DI I, 10.

¹⁵ DI I, 2.

¹⁶ DI I, 2.

way, the consequences of this will bear out in the discussion of reason and the intellect. The gift, therefore, means that as a finite intellect, we see that all things, including ourselves, desire to be as perfect as they can be according to their nature, and so we also have the desire, which, for us, means to know the truth.

The means to know truth is to form judgments about things, as to take stance on the matter and declare something to be true or false. Cusanus states, with this desire, beings have “instruments” that have the satiation of this desire as their aim.¹⁷ One of these instruments is judgment.¹⁸ As Cusanus says, “they [all beings] have an innate sense of judgment which severs the purpose of knowing.”¹⁹ What Cusanus is getting at can be grasped in looking at the original term: *Iudicium*.²⁰ Similar to the English word *judgment*, *Iudicium* also has legal connotations, in that, in casting a judgment, a declaration of the truth of some matter is made.²¹ Hence judgment is a position on something, *Socrates is mortal*, following some investigation of the nature of Socrates.

However, judgments are themselves not absolutely true. This lack of precision, insofar as a judgment could also be improved, is a major theme of Cusanus’ conception of knowledge. Notable instances are in book one chapter one,²² chapter three,²³ and book two chapter one.²⁴ In this last instance, one of the examples Cusanus provides is the impossibility of equality between

¹⁷ DI I, 2.

¹⁸ Cusanus does not name other instruments directly. The senses, reason, and the intellect could be called instruments but as will be shown, these are the means of using the instrument. It would seem better to call the senses, reason, and the intellect faculties over instruments for this reason. Yet, since Cusanus is speaking of ‘instruments’ not ‘instrument,’ it would be imprudent to say judgment is the only instrument.

¹⁹ DI I, 2.

²⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, *Nicolai De Cusa Opera Omnia*, ed. Ernestus Hoffmann, Raymundus Klibansky, and Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis, vol. 1 (Hamburg, DE: In aedibus Felicis Meiner, 1932), 5.

²¹ 1075-1076

²² DI I, 2-3.

²³ DI I, 9.

²⁴ DI II, 91-92.

material geometrical figures.²⁵ *This* triangle and *that* triangle, vary to some degree, e.g., one is slightly smaller, or the lines don't perfectly line up with the other. In this sense, judgment involves comparison, as Cusanus holds in the first chapter.²⁶ In comparison, *the* measure *to* measure what is measured.²⁷ In the example, of the triangles, the first is taken certain as triangle, insofar as the judgment 'this is a triangle' is taken as true. The other shape attempted to be said to be triangle insofar as the number of sides is compared, likewise straightness, etc. Upon some degree of similarity, the judgment is declared that they are equal. However, this is only ever relative, as is the nature of comparison. But why do we think about things comparatively?

B. Intellect and Reason

Comparative thinking is *reason* and, by its nature as comparative, it is only ever proximally true. Reason is one of the three faculties of Cusanus' psychology: *sensus* (senses) *ratio* (reason, reasoning), and *intellectus* (understanding, intellect).²⁸ According to Cusanus, the senses deal with sensuous beings, e.g., the aforementioned shapes, which are in space and time, the intellect, i.e., the (finite) quiddity of a thing,²⁹ as in the definition of a triangle, which is outside of space and time, and reason involves both as it mediates between the senses, e.g., the 'triangles,' and the intellect.³⁰ Essential to reason's nature as a mediator is the wordplay of *ratio* as a ratio, e.g., 2:4::4:8. A ratio compares things in some regards, in the example, it is the property of being double. This ratio is not qualitative but quantitative, as Cusanus says, in comparing there is "agreement in some one respect and, at the same time, indicates an

²⁵ DI II, 92.

²⁶ DI I, 2.

²⁷ DI I, 9.

²⁸ Here am I following Hopkin's translation of *ratio* and *intellectus*, see DI, 186, (footnote 24) and DI III, 215.

²⁹ DI I, 10.

³⁰ DI III, 215.

otherness.”³¹ In terms of the measure and the measured, what Cusanus is saying is that the measure and the measured agree on one manner, i.e., how the measure measures the measured.³² This one point of likeness connotes an otherness,³³ insofar as the beings compared can be compared and so are not identical. There is an inexhaustible difference to any possible measure such that there is a possibility of *infinitely* greater precision and so the possibility of *infinitely* greater truth.³⁴ Therefore, reason only ever results in proximal truth, in that, a finer comparison can always be made.

The intellect is the place of the essence of things, which are used in reason’s comparisons such that reason unfolds those essences within the intellect in judgment.³⁵ The intellect has within it “contracted” universals (as in essences, insofar as essences are the quiddity of things)³⁶ which it unfolds in understanding beings, who have a contracted essence within themselves.³⁷ Contraction is a metaphysical term for Cusanus. Jasper Hopkins states that contraction is the infinite in a finite mode.³⁸ Hence, the intellect, insofar as it is a human intellect, does not simply have the essences of things as infinite but has those essences in a finite way in such a manner

³¹ DI I, 3.

³² There is one other sort of otherness, I conjecture, another kind of otherness. The inquiry of the identity of the triangles is in regard to those beings as triangles. Hence, the measure itself can serve as many measures. The structure of reason means that we take the measure as certain and not take it in respect as another measure. However, this doesn’t lead to the same issue of imprecision. This is because the issue Cusanus is talking about is that one cannot establish a truth about some matter as it is only proximally true. The kind of otherness I am suggesting there would only reflect that one has a partial view of things. This is congenial with Cusanus, notably with Karsten Harries’ discussion of perspective in his essay “On the Power and Poverty of Perspective.” Yet, for the present argument, it doesn’t serve the critique of the reason in book one chapter one of DI. Cusanus means to show that we are not satisfied with the truth of reason on reason’s terms and not that reason’s truth is unsatisfying from some external measure, as if critique was a matter of wishful thinking.

³³ DI I, 9.

³⁴ DI I, 10.

³⁵ Cusanus’ platonic view, compare with Plato’s *Meno*, of the intellect is opposed to John Wenck’s view of the intellect as imagistic. See K. M. Ziebart, *Nicolaus Cusanus on Faith and the Intellect: A Case Study in 15th-Century Fides-Ratio Controversy* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2014), 15-23. and Plato, *Laches; Protagoras; Meno; Euthydemus*, trans. Lamb W R M. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

³⁶ DI I, 10.

³⁷ DI II, 126.

³⁸ Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Metaphysic of Contraction* (Minneapolis, Mn: Banning Press, 1983), 35-36.

that they can be repeatedly compared and applied. In this application, our understanding of the world grows, wherein reason mediates between the likeness in the thing and our intellect.

The limits of reason, as discerned by reason,³⁹ mean that the desire for truth cannot be satiated by the judgments forged by reason. What it means for reason to be limited is that it does not have absolute truth, i.e., a truth which cannot be truer, but only has proximal truth based on a tentative comparison between the essences in the intellect and the essences in things that can always be made more precise. The result is that: “both the precise combinations in corporeal things and the congruent relating of known to unknown surpass human reason.”⁴⁰ How then is the desire for truth to be fulfilled? Immediately, we can recognize that reason has found its limit, expressed in the judgment “reason is limited,” that made in the inquiry into the limits of reason. Therefore, Cusanus has not contradicted himself; rather, the desire for is not sated with reason.

C. Truth and Ignorance

With the desire for truth set beyond the limits of reason, the question remains as to where it is to find satisfaction. Cusanus argues that this desire for the truth is to be found in the intellect. Cusanus discerns the direction to send the desire for truth through reference to four wise men. First, he references Socrates’ claim of ignorance.⁴¹ This is the simple sense of learned ignorance, in that, through realizing the limits of reason, we learn that we know nothing, insofar as our collections of judgments do not deal in truth proper, i.e., absolute truth. Next is King Solomon:

³⁹ What Cusanus is doing is not what Kant did. Cusanus is not finding some island in the ocean which judgments can be made securely. There are no limits that reason can stand within for Cusanus. To speak metaphorically, any ground posited as belonging properly to reason would evaporate, leaving reason with nothing solid. See Jasper Hopkin’s essay “Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464): First Modern Philosopher?” for more comparison between Cusanus and German Idealism.

⁴⁰ DI I, 4.

⁴¹ DI I, 4.

“the very wise Solomon maintained that all things are difficult and unexplainable in words.”⁴²

With King Solomon, Cusanus reinforces our state of ignorance, in that, our use of words does not establish truth, as seen in Cusanus’ limitation of reason and judgment. With the third man, who goes unnamed, truth is not forsaken as an impossibility: “a certain other man of divine spirit says that wisdom and the seat of understanding are hidden from the eyes of all the living.”⁴³ The truth, thereby, is found above the senses and reason, with the pure intellect, i.e., the intellect without the use of reason. Upon this, his citation of Aristotle sets forth the path to attain to the truth that is to be found with the pure intellect: “in things most obvious by nature such difficulty occurs for us as for a night owl which is trying to look at the sun.”⁴⁴ What is closest to us is the hardest to see and what is closest to us is contracted infinity, as finite essences of things,⁴⁵ in the intellect. Therefore, the best possible way to exist is to seek the truth and the way to seek truth is to go beyond the senses and attend to the truth as found in the pure intellect.

Learned ignorance is the way to truth, as Cusanus says of the man who has attained learned ignorance: “the more he knows that he is unknowing, the more learned he will be.”⁴⁶ As such, we are to learn our ignorance in regard to all matters. At this juncture, a critical question must be asked: what exactly is learned? Wilhelm Dupré understands fully learning of ignorance as leading to the realization in us that “in fact, there is, as far as the purpose of knowledge and understanding is concerned, nothing better than to grow in the comprehension of one’s own ignorance.”⁴⁷ Hence, it isn’t that we gain facts about things. This view appears to be common

⁴² DI I, 4.

⁴³ DI I, 4.

⁴⁴ DI I, 4.

⁴⁵ DI I, 10.

⁴⁶ DI I, 4.

⁴⁷ Wilhelm Dupré, “Absolute Truth and Conjectural Insights,” in *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church: Essays in Memory of Chandler McCuskey Brooks for the American Cusanus Society*, ed. Gerald Christianson and Chandler McCuskey Brooks (Leiden, NY: Brill, 1996), pp. 323-340, 329.

among the commentators.⁴⁸ What is sought is incomprehensible, the infinite, God.⁴⁹ Our desire for truth leads us to the infinite, and what is more infinite is God.⁵⁰ Therefore, what it means to attain learned ignorance means to learn that seeking (absolute) truth through reason is futile, as by our nature we are ignorant of the (absolute) truth, and that path to attain (absolute) truth is to seek the ineffable, which itself further demonstrates our lack of access to the absolute truth. The illustrative method of serves this goal of apprehending the ineffable, the infinite, God, and this is what we can truth, insofar as truth is one of God's names.⁵¹

The Illustrative Method

The “illustrative method” is Cusanus’ method of apprehending the infinite through symbols. For Cusanus, “visible things are truly images of invisible things and that from created things the Creator can be knowably seen as in a mirror and a symbolism.”⁵² In the schema of the faculties, reason mediates the visible, individual thing, and the invisible, universal essence. Previously, learned ignorance as learning that truth is beyond our reason, left open the question of seeking truth beyond reason. Beyond reason are the essences in the intellect, without being limited to an individual thing. The essences in the intellect are reflective of the infinite essences of God.⁵³ The illustrative method is Cusanus’ method of leading the desire for truth beyond the finite essences in the intellect to their connection with the infinite essences, apprehended by the

⁴⁸ Hopkins, *Metaphysics of Contraction*, 36; Peter Casarella, “Justification of Faith in Nicholas of Cusa,” in *Nicholas of Cusa and Times of Transition: Essays in Honor of Gerald Christianson*, ed. Gerald Christianson et al. (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2019), pp. 175-196, 192-193; Louis Dupré, “The Question of Pantheism From Eckhart to Cusanus,” in *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*, ed. Peter J. Casarella (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), pp. 74-88, 84.

⁴⁹ DI III, 263.

⁵⁰ DI I, 87.

⁵¹ DI I, 87.

⁵² DI I, 30.

⁵³ DI II. 126.

intellect. To apprehend the infinite, the symbols are deformed, such that a circle is a line, and so forth. Cusanus discusses his illustrative method in a general manner in book one chapter three.⁵⁴ In this presentation, the method works with symbols, both linguistic and imagistic symbols, in a general manner. Later in *De Docta Ignorantia*, Cusanus discusses the details of his illustrative method.⁵⁵ First let us look at the method in general and then the detailed account.

The aim of the illustrative method is to guide us to an apprehension of the infinite through transcending finite things. On his method, Cusanus states, “someone who desires to grasp the meaning must elevate his intellect above the import of the words rather than insisting upon the proper significations of words which cannot be properly adapted to such great intellectual mysteries.”⁵⁶ The meaning being referred to is the preliminary discussion of God, the cosmos, and humanity, as treated in a ‘maximal’ manner apprehended by the pure intellect.⁵⁷ For Cusanus, the maximum is that which nothing is greater or lesser, i.e., it is beyond comparison.⁵⁸ This is itself a symbol for truth, in that the truth is also beyond being lesser or greater.⁵⁹ Hence, the meaning to be grasped is the meaning of the truth as above reason, which Cusanus explicates as his Christen metaphysical system of God, the cosmos, and humanity. To *grasp* the meaning, we are to “elevate [our] intellect above the import of the words.”⁶⁰ Based on the previous analysis, to elevate the intellect means to apprehend what is beyond the limits of reason, i.e., the infinite. As for elevation regarding words, Cusanus is preparing the reader for his *paradoxical* statements, such as the minimum is the maximum.⁶¹ In elevating the intellect, words are no

⁵⁴ DI I, 8.

⁵⁵ DI I, 33.

⁵⁶ DI I, 8.

⁵⁷ DI I, 5-7.

⁵⁸ DI I, 11.

⁵⁹ DI I, 10.

⁶⁰ DI I, 8.

⁶¹ DI I, 11.

longer bound to their regular usage as naming sensuous things and are so treated without that limitation, and so they are treated infinitely, such that they coincide with each other as they are without a limit. As infinite, therefore, the ideas associated with the words come together as one. This coincidence is brought about through illustrations. On this matter, Cusanus says, “moreover, it is necessary to use guiding illustrations in a transcendent way and to leave behind perceptible things, so that the reader may readily ascend unto simple intellectuality.”⁶² Illustration here is not purely ‘a picture’ but also connotes *illustrating a point*. The latter gets to the heart of the matter. For Cusanus, the means to the pure intellection of the infinite is brought about through guidance not automatically in learning one’s ignorance. Karsten Harries explicates guidance as learning that there is no absolute perspective, only *a* perspective, i.e., perspective is recognized as perspective.⁶³ Following Harries, the guidance is to see a thing as a finite symbol as only one symbol of many, thereby immediately transcending the finitude of the symbol. Hence, the guidance consists in apprehending the idea as unsymbolized and so unlimited, and taken fully, as a maximum learning of ignorance,⁶⁴ all things are limitations of the infinite. Therefore, the illustrative method is the means to bring about a knowing of things as symbols, limitations, of the infinite.

The illustrative method accomplishes its aim of an apprehension of the infinite through transcending the symbols in deforming the symbols. What remained unclear in Cusanus’ earlier discussion of his method is the actual structure of the method. Cusanus speaks of the structure of the method in the context of his mathematical illustrations. The method has three structural

⁶² DI I, 8.

⁶³ Karsten Harries, “On the Power and Poverty of Perspective,” in *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*, ed. Peter J. Casarella (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), pp. 105-126, 112-113.

⁶⁴ DI I, 4-5.

moments.⁶⁵ David Albertson provides an excellent breakdown of the three moments: 1) the pure geometric shape, 2) the infinitization of the figure, and 3) the melting away of the figure.⁶⁶ For Cusanus, the goal is to get beyond the sensuous, and so we must begin with a general shape, e.g., ‘triangle,’ not a triangle, as to not get trapped in particularities. According to Albertson, the symbol undergoes an “automatic self-iconoclasm.”⁶⁷ This self-iconoclasm is only such in the context of the method. Tomasz Stępień stresses that it isn’t the symbols themselves but the power of the intellect to consider them infinitely.⁶⁸ By the power of the intellect, the symbols are not limited to their finite nature by deforming them into each other through their “characteristics and relations” into others.⁶⁹ In the third moment the opposed, in being shown to be related through being deformed beyond their limits as finite, and are brought into the simple, undifferentiated, infinite. Cusanus’ illustrations are essentially a movement, as Luc Bergmans emphasizes.⁷⁰ It is as if, behind the moving figures on the page of the mind, there is the invisible infinity that is apprehended in the movement. The transcendence via symbols emerges in the movement between the different figures as they are deformed into each other. Therefore, in this way, the method proceeds: 1) a (finite) symbol, taken, according, as a limited view of the essence

⁶⁵ DI I, 33.

⁶⁶ David Albertson, “Before the Icon: The Figural Matric of De Visione Dei,” in *Nicholas of Cusa and Times of Transition: Essays in Honor of Gerald Christianson*, ed. Gerald Christianson et al. (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2019), pp. 262-285, 276.

⁶⁷ Albertson, *Before the Icon*, 276.

⁶⁸ Tomasz Stępień, “The Understanding of Symbols and Their Role in the Ascent of the Soul to God in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Nicholas of Cusa,” *Roczniki Filozoficzne* 63, no. 2 (2015): pp. 85-103, <https://doi.org/10.18290/rf.2015.63.2-7>, 99.

⁶⁹ DI I, 33.

⁷⁰ Luc Bergmans, “Nicholas of Cusa's Vanishing Geometrical Figures and the Mystical Tradition of »Entbildung«,” in *Das Mathematikverständnis Des Nikolaus Von Kues: Mathematische, Naturwissenschaftliche Und Philosophisch-Theologische Dimensionen: Akten Der Tagung Im Schwäbischen Tagungs- Und Bildungszentrum Kloster Irsee Vom 8.-10. Dezember 2003*, ed. Friedrich Pukelsheim and Harald Schwaetzer (Trier: Paulinus, 2005), pp. 313-322.

which it symbolizes,⁷¹ 2) the infinitization of the symbols, their deformation into other symbols, 3) the melting away of the symbol into a pure apprehension of the infinite.

The Concept of Truth

Truth is itself indivisible and infinite, totally within itself without limit, and our intellect apprehends the truth, through contemplating on its own proximal truth as a reflection of the truth. This concept of truth underlies Cusanus' illustration of the connection between the intellect and the truth in the inscribed polygon illustration.⁷² The concept of truth is implicit, as it does not feature front and center. The reason that it remains implicit is that Cusanus' immediate aim in chapter three of book one is an additional argument for learned ignorance using symbols. To make Cusanus' concept of truth explicit, first, the connection between the intellect and truth in inscribed polygon illustration will be investigated, and second, this connection, via the illustrative method, will be examined.

Cusanus illustrates the connection between the intellect and the truth with the symbol of the inscribed polygon.⁷³ In this illustration Cusanus symbolizes truth with the circle and the intellect with the polygon.⁷⁴ Picture a circle with some regular polygon inscribed within it, for example, a triangle, square, pentagon, etc. Through this symbol, Cusanus explicates the relationship between the intellect: "the more angles the inscribed polygon has the more similar it is to the circle. However, even if the number of its angles is increased ad infinitum, the polygon

⁷¹ While a pure triangle is generally freed from the sensuous it still has some material associations DI I, 33-34). In infinitizing it, all triangles are united and, further, it itself is unified with other ideas of geometrical figures. This does not create a more general idea but jumps to the pure simple infinity which these ideas, even as nearly pure, are themselves limitations of the infinite.

⁷² DI I, 9-10.

⁷³ DI I, 9-10.

⁷⁴ DI I, 10.

never becomes equal [to the circle] unless it is resolved into an identity with the circle.”⁷⁵

Cusanus’ use of the word intellect is somewhat misleading. He opens the paragraph by discussing the finite intellect.⁷⁶ Our intellect is finite and never becomes an infinite intellect. The intellect was said to have the infinite as contracted as the various ideas which are judged of things.⁷⁷ When judging things, we normally compare our limited view of the essence with the limited essence in the thing.⁷⁸ This is reflected in the growth of the number of sides of the polygon. We judgment more and more things, expanding our understanding of the world. However, due to the limits of reason, this is only ever proximal truth. In the illustration, we are always infinitely far from the truth, in that we try to expand our contracted ideas but never attain their proper infinity in this way.⁷⁹ Intellect, in this way of expanding via reason, is likened to possibility and truth to necessity.⁸⁰ Therefore, the intellect in its comparisons is left speechless, for there is always an infinite distance between its finite reflection of the infinite truth.

The concept of truth is the infinite which our intellect has but a finite reflection of. Implicit in Cusanus’ illustration is his concept of truth. Cusanus goes further in actually illustrating the connection between the intellect and truth, which was presented without Cusanus speaking about his concept of truth, only the proximal truth. In the illustration, the circle symbolizes the infinite’s connection with the finite. Elizabeth Brient identifies this relationship as the aim of a convergent series and develops the idea of the circle, and so the truth, as a limit-concept.”⁸¹ In terms of understanding the inscribed polygon with the method, the movement is

⁷⁵ DI I, 10.

⁷⁶ DI I, 10.

⁷⁷ DI I, 126.

⁷⁸ DI I, 126.

⁷⁹ DI I, 10.

⁸⁰ DI I, 10.

⁸¹ Elizabeth Brient, “How Can the Infinite Be the Measure of the Finite?” in *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*, ed. Peter J. Casarella (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), pp. 210-225, 222.

the polygon's variation from a triangle to a square, to a hexagon, and so on, "*ad infinitum*."⁸²

The deformation of the lower polygon into the higher polygon happens within the boundary of the circle. No human intellect, save Christ,⁸³ attains equality between their intellect and truth.

However, the truth as the limit of the activity of the intellect in its desire for truth gives structure and meaning to the proximal truths of the intellect. The intellect apprehends its connection to the truth, not as its limit but what which gives sense to it as limited. In the illustration, taken with the illustrative method, we apprehend the infinite in overcoming our limited view of truth in understanding we have a limited sense of the infinite truth. How our truth partakes in the infinite truth is that our proximal truth is the contracted mode of the absolute truth, i.e., as its finite mode. This absolute truth remains transcendent, but our intellect apprehends the absolute truth through its connection to the intellect through the intellect's proximal truth. Therefore, the truth is itself indivisible and infinite, totally within itself without limit, and our intellect apprehends the truth, through contemplating on its own proximal truth as a reflection of the truth.

Conclusion

In order to show Cusanus' concept of truth, as infinite truth which our intellect apprehends through its own proximal truth as a reflection of the infinite truth, we had to clarify the connection between truth and infinite. This itself required clarifications on the nature of learned ignorance and the illustrative method. In the course of this investigation, learned ignorance was shown to be to learn that seeking (absolute) truth through reason is futile, as, by our nature, we are ignorant of the (absolute) truth, and that path to attain (absolute) truth is to seek the ineffable, which itself further demonstrates our lack of access to the absolute truth.

⁸² DI I, 10.

⁸³ DI III, 233.

Within this state of learned ignorance, the illustrative method was used to clarify the relationship between the intellect and truth. The illustrative method was how the proximal truth, through the intellect, was shown to connect to the infinite truth. The nature of our connection with the truth is such that the proximal truth is a reflection of the infinite truth, as a contracted, i.e., finite, mode of the infinite truth. This concept of truth was itself underlying the desire for truth and was itself reached out of said desire. Therefore, since truth's nature is to be apprehended as contracted within a finite intellect, the method for apprehending the truth is grounded in truth. Upon this circularity, the intellect attains satisfaction in its desire for truth in embracing its finite grasp of the quiddity of things, i.e., the truth of things,⁸⁴ as connected to the truth and so we find satisfaction in apprehending the connection between the proximal and absolute truth.

⁸⁴ DI I, 10.

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