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Gaudium de libertate

Nicholas of Cusa and the Ethics of Freedom

The title of my paper (*Gaudium de libertate*) takes after a famous phrase of Augustine. In the tenth book of *Confessiones*, Augustine described as «gaudium de veritate» the «beatitudo» which all men quest for and which is the first and main «notitia innata» inherent in each of us (X 20, 29; 23, 34). In this way, Augustine connected for the first time two sides of human experience that Ancient thought had always kept separate; for the latter, in fact, truth is the very object of a «pure reason», and it can only be known by a subject who has detached himself from any kind of passion. For Augustine, on the contrary, «joy» and «truth» describe the profound dimensions of our person; both are contained in the «mira profunditas» of our memory (XI 14, 21-22), where that «desiderium beatitudinis» which is originally present in every man is kept. For, as Augustine explains in the seventh book of *Confessiones*, illustrating the difference between the Platonic and Christian views, truth is not only something that we want to «see», but it is rather a «country» in which we wish to «live»: that is, we are looking for a «truth» that fully realizes our personal life, with its desire for knowledge and with the impetus of its passions. Such a link between «gaudium» and «veritas» has remained a characteristic element of the entire Augustinian tradition, within which Cusanus can also be placed in many ways.

So, for example, in *De pace fidei* Cusanus takes up the Augustinian distinction between «the inner man» and «the outer man» and observes that the «homo interior» has an original quest for «perfectio», for a full completion of his life. This is the inner man's «ultimum desiderium». The «inner man», however, is the man endowed with «intellectus», and therefore his «ultimum desiderium» is for «truth», since «truth» is «the food of intellect», according to a locution which often occurs in Cusanus and traces back to *Confessiones*, where Augustine introduces it

with regard to the inner ascent to the «beatitudo» (IX 10, 24)¹. For, as Cusanus had explained since *De docta ignorantia*, the quest for truth («studium veritatis») is the way by means of which beings endowed with intellect perfect and preserve themselves (I, Prol., 1, 23: «intellectus cuius intelligere est esse»), just as all natural beings seek for nourishment suiting their nature in order to grow and preserve themselves (I, Prol., 1, 19-23; I 1, 2, 1 ff.). However, the truth that can nourish our intellect can only be a «tasteful» food², which, at the same time, brings great joy («gaudet intellectus in haec venatione laetissima»)³. It is therefore that Augustine had written with his inimitable language: «anima pascitur unde laetatur» (Conf., XIII 27, 42). In this sense, for Cusanus, as for the Augustinian tradition, the quest for truth does not concern only the intellect, but involves both «intellectus» and «affectus», «intelligentia» and «desiderium», «cognitio» and «amor»; as it is said in the *Sermo CLXXII* (n. 3, 21 f.), «mens sine desiderio non intelligit, et sine intellectu non desiderat»⁴. Therefore, man can only quest for this ultimate end of his existence «cum affectu»⁵ and, as it is repeatedly said in *De sapientia*, he can only grasp it through a sort of inner «taste»⁶, thanks to which he can experience its «dulcedo» and the deep «delectatio» that it brings about⁷.

¹ Cf., for example, *De conc. cath.*, I 3, 17, 1 ff.; *De docta.*, I 3, 10 ff.; *De con.*, II 17, 178, 1-3; *De sap.*, I 2, 5 ff.; 12, 15, 1 ff.; *De ven. sap.*, I 2, 5 ff.; *Comp.*, III 7, 4-8; IX 16, 14-18.

² Cf. *De ven. sap.*, Prol., 1, 15-16: «Sollicitamur appetitu naturae nostrae indito ad non solum scientiam, sed sapientiam seu sapidam scientiam habendum». *De sap.*, I 10, 7-8 («Est sapientia, quae sapit, quae nihil dulcius intellectui»); *De non aliud*, XIX 84, 20; *De ludo*, II 67, 28; II 70, 9-10. *Crib. Alk.*, II 17, 145, 5 s. The etymological interpretation, which leads back the term «sapientia» to «sapor», is widely attested in the medieval tradition: cf. G. Stabile, *Sapor-sapientia*, 287-344. Cusanus might have taken it from the writing, handed down under the name of Augustine: *De spiritu et anima* (PL 40, 779-832), that Cusanus possessed (*cod. Cus.* 55); cf. chap. 11, PL 40, 786: «Sapientia namque est amor boni sive sapor boni, a sapore siquidem dicitur. Mentis visio est intelligentia; gustus, sapientia est. Illa contemplatur, ista delectatur».

³ *De ven. sap.*, XVI 46, 1.

⁴ Cf. also *De sap.*, I 15, 8-14; *De dato*, I 92, 4-6; *De mente*, V 147, 6 f.; *De vis. Dei*, XVI 70, 3-7. Therefore, it is only through collaboration between these two powers that man can properly strive towards eternal wisdom, that is, towards God, labelled in *Sermo XLVIII* as «primus intellectus» and as «purus affectus».

⁵ Cf. *De sap.*, I 4, 15; I 7, 5 f.; I 9, 3; I 12, 4; I 16, 9.

⁶ «Gustare»: I 8, 3; I 9, 12; I 10, 5 s.; 12-14; I 12, 3 s.; 6 s.; I 14, 2 s.; «degustare»: I 10, 3; I 13, 3; cfr. *Sermo CLXXXIX*, n. 3, 16; «experimentaliter gustare»: I 15, 8; I 16, 7; I 19, 7 f.; cf. *De vis. Dei*, V 13, 6; XVI 79, 1-4; «accipere in interno gustu»: I 19, 6.

⁷ As for «dulcedo», cf. *De sap.*, I 10, 7; I 11, 5; *De pace fidei*, IV 12, 16; *Sermo CLXXXIX*, n. 9, 15; *Sermo CLXIX*, n. 4, 19; *Sermo CCXIII*, n. 8, 21; *Sermo CCXLVI*, n. 18, 4-7; as for «delectatio»: cf. *De ven. sap.*, XII 33, 5-8; *Sermo*

In this «Augustinian» link between «gaudium» and «veritas» one of the reasons can be found for the role played by the phenomenon of game in Cusanus' thought. This is what I would like to show in my paper, starting from a brief analysis of *De ludo globi*; in particular, my intention is to illustrate the meaning of the relationship between «game» («iucundus ludus»: I 1, 8) and freedom introduced by Cusanus in the first pages of the dialogue⁸.

II. Homo ludens

1. As it is well known, Cusanus refers to the phenomenon of game in different contexts⁹. In *De possess*, for example, game is used to «symbolically» illustrate the unity of «motion» and «rest» in the Absolute, which Cusanus often introduces into his writings as an example of the «coincidentia oppositorum» in God. In this sense, Cusanus takes up an idea characteristic of the Neoplatonic tradition¹⁰. The latter, in fact, had shown that the divine Intellect cannot be regarded as an «unmoved motor», as Aristotle had claimed, and therefore as a pure or «static» identity. In its controversy about Aristotelian theology, Neoplatonism had argued that the absolute self-awareness of God, which Aristotle spoke of in the twelfth book of *Metaphysics*, can only be adequately explained if it is understood as a dynamic and relational unity, in which, as Plato had said in the *Sophist* (249 e ff.), «identity» and «difference», «motion» and «rest», are dialectically connected as two poles blending with each other¹¹. For this reason, as Eriugena explained, taking up the Neoplatonic view, the Trinitarian self-relation of God must be labelled as a «motus stabilis» and a «status mobilis»¹². Now, this original coincidence of «movement» and «rest» in the Absolute remains incomprehensible to us from a conceptual point of view:

XXXVIII, n. 13, 18-21; Sermo CLXXXIX, n. 3, 13; 19; Sermo CCXI, n. 17, 4-6; Sermo CCXIII, n. 8, 21 s.; Sermo CCXVI, n. 18, 5-7; Sermo CCLXXXVIII, n. 2, 8-19.

⁸ On Cusanus' view of Freedom, cf. Herold: *Die Willensfreiheit*, 145-179, who presents an extensive analysis of the writings of Cusanus; Von Bredow: *Nachdenken*, 245-263; Kremer: *Gottes Vorsehung*, 319-351; Schwaetzer: *Sei du das, was du willst*, 319-332; Mandrella: *Viva imago*, 244-269.

⁹ On the phenomenon of game and its meaning in Cusanus' thought, cf. Borsche / Schwaetzer (eds.), *Können-Spielen-Loben*, 239-429; Von Bredow: *Der spielende Philosoph*, 23-31; De Gandillac: *Symbolisme ludiques*, 346-35; Watts: *Nicolaus Cusanus*, 189-223; Senger: *Globus intellectualis*, 98 ff.; Eckert: *Spiel und Wahrheit*, 70-86.

¹⁰ Cf. Gersh: *Kinesis Akinetos*, 7-26; 103 ff.

¹¹ Cf. Plotinus, *Enn.*, II 3, 20, ff.; V 1, 4, 36-37; V 9, 7, 11 ff.; VI 2, 8, 7-9; VI 6, 3, 30 ff. See Peroli: *Dio, uomo e mondo*, 63 ff.

¹² Cf. Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, I 12; I 77; I 11; II 23.

we, in fact, can only think by keeping opposites separate, so that we can form a concept of movement only to the extent that we distinguish it from rest (53, 1-3). For this reason, in order to somehow conceive of what exceeds all our rational understanding and all language, we need to be «guided by hand» (*manuductio*) by an «aenigma», that is, by a sensible image (18, 3 ff.: «aliquo sensibili phantasmate manuduci»; 27, 1-4), without which «we would have no way of accessing the unknown God» (54, 3-6).

The example introduced by Cusanus to «symbolically» illustrate the coincidence of opposites in the Absolute is taken from the game of the spinning top. Cusanus first of all draws attention to an experience that all children have had the opportunity to undergo, that is, the fact that a spinning top, when it rotates very quickly, seems to be still (18, 8-17). If we start from this experience and assume that the movement of the spinning top can reach an «infinite speed», then we understand how, in such a hypothesis, «there would be no motion, but rest» (19, 1-10). For, if a spinning top could rotate at an infinite speed, it would be present «at the same time» in all the different points of its circular motion, which would end up coinciding, without one «being anterior in time» with respect to the other (19, 6-10). In this way, «a child's play, which we all know also in practice» (18, 7), allows us to «symbolically see» what for our rational thought is contradictory. In this sense, game has a similar function to that attributed by Cusanus to the linguistic expression «possest», which he introduces as his new «nomen Dei». For, the peculiarity of the expression «possest» lies precisely in the fact that it unifies in a single word the ontological categories of «potentia» and «actus», which, according to the traditional Aristotelian doctrine, we can only think of as opposed to each other.

2. In *De ludo globi* Cusanus does not go in search for a new «nomen Dei», as he had done a few years earlier in *De possest*, and he does not deal only with philosophical theology. In *De ludo globi* Cusanus addresses a multiplicity of different topics, although not systematically. The «game of wisdom» (*ludus sapientiae*), as it is defined, played by Cusanus with his two young interlocutors, seems to reflect that character of variability and improvisation which is an ingredient of any playful activity, as it is highlighted from the beginning of the dialogue. During the discussion one often jumps from one topic to another; John and Albert continually raise new questions, some of which, however, are not discussed, others are resumed at different times in the dialogue, creating a certain overlap between the two books¹³. From Cusanus' frequent references to his earlier writings (I 19, 13; 43, 21; 50, 1-3; II 82, 33; 89, 1; 109, 18-19), it seems

¹³ Cf. Watts: *The Game of Spheres*, 22-23

clear that he wants to introduce his two young visitors to some of the themes of his philosophy. But, as in many other cases, even in *De ludo globi* Cusanus does not intend to offer a systematic exposition of his ideas (I 3, 2-10). At the beginning of the dialogue, Cusanus explains that he proposes to «sow seeds of knowledge» in the minds of his young interlocutors so that they can autonomously develop their «philosophical speculation» (I 3, 1-5; I 7, 1-2). In accordance with this intention, Cusanus wants to show his two young friends how it is possible to face a series of philosophical questions starting from a phenomenon, such as the game of bowling-ball, of which they can have a direct experience («haec clare experimus»: I 5, 13)¹⁴.

Cusanus explains this idea in the first part of his conversation with John (I 5, 1 ff.). After illustrating the functioning of the new game he has just invented, Cusanus focuses on the geometric shape of the ball, that is, its spherical shape, which also characterizes the different circles traced on the playing field. All the circles of the «ludus globi» are in fact «examples of roundness» and differ from each other according to the distance they have from the center (II 79, 12-16). No circle drawn on the playing field,

¹⁴ In this sense, the «ludus globi» can be also regarded as a symbolic representation of the movement itself of philosophical speculation (I 2, 5-6: «Hoc enim tam iucundum globi exercitium nobis non parvam puto rapraesentare philosophiam»). For, just as the common goal of all players is to throw their own ball so that it reaches the centre, so the task of philosophical speculation consists in leading man «to see and to comprehend, by means of his rational power, the cause of all things and of himself» (II 101, 16-18). This, in fact, is the «centre» which we all aim to in playing the «game» of our life. In this sense, in an analogous way to the trajectory followed by the ball along the concentric circles of the playing field, the movement of philosophical speculation proceeds from the outside to the inside, from what is manifest and visible to what is in itself invisible or hidden, since it is the principle of all things (II 104, 7-8: «finis manifesti est occultum, et extrinseci intrinsecum»). In this lies the «mystical» meaning of the bowling-game, which Cusanus refers to several times in the course of the dialogue (I 54, 17; 60, 1; II 61, 13; 62, 1; 104, 14). In this context, the term «mysticism» designates the «philosophical speculation» (I 7, 2), for which Cusanus proposes to «hunt» together with his two young interlocutors starting from the phenomenon of game, as it is said at the beginning of the dialogue (I 7, 5-7). In this sense, as Cusanus explains in the course of the second book, «to look mystically» (104, 14: «mystice legere») at the design of the circles of the «ludus globi» means to try to bring all that manifests itself in the horizon of our experience back to its ultimate foundation. The latter, as the principle of all that is visible, is in itself hidden or not manifest, just as the concentric circles of the playing field are all connected, in different ways, to the centre from which all of them derive and which is hidden in the depths of the inner circle (104, 1 ff.). On the philosophical and theological meaning of the «ludus globi», see Heinz-Mohr: *Das Globusspiel*; Thurner: *Theologische Unendlichkeitsspekulation*, 81-128.

however, is perfectly round; the perfect or maximal roundness can be symbolically represented by the center around which the different circles are arranged concentrically, since it is the principle of everything that is round and the criterion by which we can judge things as more or less round and compare them with each other (I 11, 7 ff.). In itself, however, the perfect or «maxima rotunditas», i.e. that roundness «than which there cannot be a greater» (I 16, 1-3), is not visible, since no sensible round thing exemplifies it in a complete way (I 8, 6 f.; 12, 4 f.; 15, 1 ff.).

After these basic elements of Platonic philosophy, Cusanus explains to John that even the spherical roundness traditionally attributed to the world to indicate its perfection (I 9, 1 ff.)¹⁵ is actually invisible. For, as according to Platonic philosophy (I 12, 4) we can see the single round things, but not the very roundness of which they participate, so we can see the single beings existing in the world, but the world, understood as the totality of all that exists («rerum universitas»: I 10, 14), according to the concept of «mundus» or «universum» introduced in *De docta ignorantia*, is invisible to us (I 9, 1-2; 13, 4 ff.; 14, 1 ff.; 15, 5 ff.). Cusanus adds that the universe could not be seen as a whole even by an observer who was, by hypothesis, outside it (I 10, 1-4). Even such an observer, in fact, could see of the universe only what would be accessible to him from his perspective, as Cusanus had explained in his cosmological theses of 1440 and as he then repeated in *De coniecturis*. For this reason, even if we had an «archimedic» point outside the universe, the latter would remain invisible to us in its totality. (I 14, 9-12)¹⁶.

For this reason, we cannot reach an overall or «global» understanding of the world from our own experience and, therefore, we cannot form any empirical concept of it. These remarks on the limits of our knowledge are only a first step in the reflection which Cusanus proposes to guide his

¹⁵ In Plato's *Timaeus* (33 b 1 ff.), the sphere is the form that the divine demiurge has given to the sensitive world to express and manifest in it the perfection of its intelligible model, that is, the world of Ideas. As Mahnke (*Unendliche Sphäre*, 215-223) has shown, it will be Plotinus who, going beyond Plato, will make the sphere the symbol of the *kósmos noëtós* (cf. *Enn.*, II 9, 17, 5: *sphaíra noetē*; VI 5, 10, 44), that is, of the structure of the divine intellect, understood as an «infinite sphere». Taken up and developed by Proclus (cf., for example, *In Parm.*, VI 1084, 33 ss. Cousin; *In Tim.*, II 77, 26 ss. Diehl; *In Eucl.*, 91, 9 ss. Friedlein), this metaphysical interpretation of the geometric figure of the sphere has given rise to a long tradition that goes as far as Cusanus (Mahnke, 48 ff.; 76 ff.; 144 ff.).

¹⁶ De ludo, I 14, 6-10: «Ioannes: ideo mundum non videmus, nisi in quantum per partes rerum formas videmus; quibus subtractis nec mundum nec eius formam videremus. Cardinalis: Bene dicis. Nam mundi forma rotunditas est invisibilis».

young friends. For, through the example of the «*ludus globi*» Cusanus wants to introduce them to a basic idea of his thought that he had developed since *De coniecturis*. According to such an idea, we can access knowledge, however conjectural, of the reality of the world through an analysis of the nature of our mind, since between human mind and its products there is a relationship similar to that existing between God and creatures¹⁷. As Cusanus explains in the course of the second book, taking up the thesis he had maintained from the very first writings, the human mind has an original «*vis creativa*», thanks to which it builds its conceptual world in the same way as God creates the real world. This «*vis creativa*» of the mind is manifested in all intellectual, artistic and technical productions through which man gives shape to his world and in which the «*imago Dei*» present in us resides. For this reason, man can be considered a «*second god*», as it is said in *De beryllo*, because «he has an intellect that is a likeness of the divine Intellect, with respect to creating» (7, 5-6). By virtue of this «*similitudo*», through the human mind we can grasp to some extent the process of the constitution of reality and its structure, albeit in a way that is still conjectural and «*symbolic*»: «*in speculo et aenigmate*», according to the Pauline expression, that is, through the «*mirror*» and the «*image*» of God's creative power manifesting itself in the «*vis creativa*» of the human mind.

This explains why the phenomenon of game also contains a «*philosophy of no small value*», as it is said in the opening lines of the dialogue (I 2, 6). As in any form of intellectual, artistic or technical creation, in game, in fact, comes to light that spontaneous and inventive capacity of the human mind, thanks to which man is able to act in the world as an image of God. For this reason, being an expression of man's inventive imagination and a product of his art, even the bowling-ball can be an example through which we can access a «*symbolic*» understanding of the structure of reality and its relationship with the divine Principle. As Cusanus explains to John in the first book (I 44-49), if we consider how man produces a wooden ball, inventing a technical tool (the lathe) by which he can realize the idea he has in his mind, and how he then sets it in motion when he plays the game he has invented, then we can also come to «*make conjectures about the creative art of God*» (I 45, 11-12); we can understand, even though in a

¹⁷ De beryl., 7, 1 ff.: «*Quarto adverte Hermetem Trismegistum dicere hominem esse secundum deum. Nam sicut deus est creator entium realium et naturalium formarum, ita homo rationalium entium et formarum artificialium, quae non sunt nisi sui intellectus similitudines sicut creaturae dei divini intellectus similitudines. Ideo homo habet intellectum, qui est similitudo divini intellectus in creando*».

conjectural and «symbolic» way, how God created the sphere of the world and set it in motion¹⁸.

III. *Dignitas hominis*

For this reason, although the *De ludo globi* deals with different topics, the central theme around which the dialogue revolves is the nature of man, his relationship with God and his place in the world. Through the phenomenon of game Cusanus wants to point out freedom as the essential element of «dignitas et excellentia hominis»¹⁹. Thus, Cusanus does not take up the

¹⁸ Cusanus discusses this theme extensively in the second book of *De ludo globi*. In the dialogue he has with the younger Albert, Cusanus illustrates, through some examples, how one can «practically» use the model of the «ludus globi» to reach a symbolic knowledge of the world and its structure. Cusanus had followed a similar procedure in *De coniecturis*, of which, in the course of his dialogue with Albert, he takes up many themes, although he does not mention expressly his previous work. In the second part of *De coniecturis*, in fact, Cusanus had illustrated a series of «practical applications» of his «ars coniecturalis» to explain, for the benefit of young people (I Prol., 4, 1), how to use the new research method exposed in the first part of the work and how to use the different «symbolic» figures that exemplify it. In his dialogue with the young Albert, Cusanus pursues a similar pedagogical intent, but replaces the complex symbolic figures of *De coniecturis* with the simplest model of the «ludo globi». In this sense, Cusanus explains how it is possible to consider the centre of the «ludus globi» as a symbolic representation of the principle of all things and the concentric circles traced on the playing field as an image of the overall articulation of reality, that progressively ascends from the «formless chaos» to the elements and then to the vegetative and sensory powers that are proper to all living beings, to finally reach spiritual nature (104, 10 ff.). This progressive ascent from the corporeal to the spiritual nature «ends in the tenth circle», because, according to the ancient Pythagorean doctrine, «the number ten» is the origin of all the other numbers. Moreover, as the natural series of numbers develops according to four fundamental units (1, 10, 100, 1000) and it is perfectly articulated in four moments, so the overall order of the universe has a «quaternary» structure (II 106, 1 ff.), as Cusanus had explained extensively in *De coniecturis* (cf. Senger: *Die Funktion*, 121-149). Finally, unlike the geocentric model of the Aristotelian and Medieval tradition, in the arrangement of the universe symbolically illustrated by the concentric circles of the «ludus globi», the center is constituted by the sun, while the circles surrounding it represent the fire, the air and the three outer circles the water, «which ends on the black earth» (78, 12-14).

¹⁹ Cf. Colomer: *Das Menschenbild*, 142 ff.; Mandrella: *Viva imago*, 253: «Freiheit konnotiert für Cusanus stets Würde – immer wieder werden die Begriffe nobilis et liber geradezu synonym verwendet». Cf. Crib. Alk., II 2, 93 («nobilitas intellectualis naturae, que libera est [...]»); Sermo CLXXV, n. 1, 12 ff. («unde, cum sit bonus et intellectualem naturam nobilissimam creaverit liberam [...]»); Sermo CLXXXVII, n. 10, 12 ff. («homo, qui sine libero arbitrio non potuit nobilis Dei creatura esse»);

traditional argument, still present in Lorenzo Valla, according to which the relevance of freedom lies in the fact that freedom is the basis of any moral judgment on human actions. Cusanus takes into account freedom as the original condition of that «vis creativa» in which, in his view, the «imago dei» of man lies²⁰. For this reason, if in *De beryllo*, for example, Cusanus argues that man can be regarded as a «second God» because of the «vis creativa» of his mind, in one of his *Sermons* he can say the same about freedom: «natura intellectualis in hoc quod habet liberum arbitrium est creatori similior et est quasi alius deus» (CLXVIII, n. 8, 1-3)²¹.

In this sense, from the very first pages Cusanus explains that the philosophical meaning of game lies in the fact that it can lead us to knowledge of ourselves, that is, of the true nature of our spirit (I 3, 1-5). For, game is an activity that only men are able to carry out: «No animal produces a ball and directs its motion to an end» (I 3, 7). In all their behavior, animals act on the basis of what their natural impulse requires of them. For this reason, «all members of the same species are compelled and moved by a single specific motion, as by innate law of nature», so «spiders observe a single law in regard both to their webs and to their method of hunting and swallows observe a single law in their nest-building and in countless other actions» (I 35, 10-13). Of course, man, like all other animals, has a complex of inclinations and natural impulses coming from his empirical nature and characterizing him as part of the sensitive world. Therefore, like all other animals, we too «are driven by the necessity of our corporeal and sensitive nature», so that «we think about, consider and choose», that is we perform the acts proper to every rational deliberation (cf. I 31, 3-4; 32, 10 ff.), in order to be able to get, in an effective and lasting way, those things that «our animal nature requires of us» (I 36, 1-5).

Sermo CCXXIII, n. 5, 1 ff. («Efficitur igitur anima magis abundans in libera et nobili vivifica voluntas...»); Sermo CCLVI, n. 6, 2 («nobiles creaturae liberae voluntatis»); Sermo CCLXXIX, n. 5, 14-16 («nam rationalis spiritus liber est et nobilis secundum libertatem divinae rationis creatus»); Sermo CCLI, n. 15, 2-10: «Hoc autem non negligendum quod libertas arbitrii in mente est [...]. Et habet eam libertatem, quia est ad imaginem Dei creata. Et videtur attente consideranti quod prima causa ut causa posuit suam similitudinem in ipsa, ut sit viva imago sive causata causa; nec est possibile dignitatem eius exprimi».

²⁰ From this point of view, the concept of freedom is a «transcendental» concept, as is the very notion of «dignitas hominis»: the latter, in fact, does not indicate a specific human right, but says what the foundation of every human right is.

²¹ Cf. Sermo CLVIII, n. 5, 11-13: «Anima intellectiva fit deiformior, quia est imago creatoris viva, quae habet in se imaginem libertatis illius virtutis, quae “omnia fecit ut voluit”».

Regarded from this point of view, man is nothing but a more developed animal than the others, a «rational animal», according to the traditional Aristotelian definition: an animal able, with its reason, to manage its natural needs in a more conscious and efficient way than the other living beings of the world are able to do. The fact, however, that, unlike all other animals, human beings are able to play shows that they can also make their own choices and perform their actions in an autonomous and spontaneous way; that they are able to establish objectives that may be different from those required by their nature. Without this inner distance from our natural impulses, «our regal and imperial spirit would invent anything, but would only comply with the impulse of its nature» (I 35, 7-9).

For this reason, game can lead us to knowledge of ourselves (I 3, 45). For, through the experience of game man can learn (I 36, 4: «experimentaliter cognoscere»; II 105, 6-8) that he can be a spontaneous and free principle of actions that do not depend on his natural dimension, as happens, on the contrary, in the behavior of all other living beings. Of course, even game has its own laws; it requires rules and an order without which no playful activity could be carried out. In this sense, as there is a law of nature, so there is also a «lex ludi» (I 50, 9). The «lex ludi», however, requires the spontaneity, autonomy and inventiveness of the players²², without which there could not be that joy which is a constitutive part of any form of play, as Cusanus points out several times.

For, the meaning of game lies precisely in the fact that it creates an order and a regularity that are different from those imposed by nature. The playful order, in fact, is not subordinate to a predetermined purpose given to it from the outside; game has rather an internal purpose and does not aim at the satisfaction of any natural need. From this point of view, game is useless, or it has an aim «without purpose» (to use a Kantian expression), and precisely in this lies its philosophical meaning.

For, through game it comes to light that men relate to their nature in a different way than all other living beings relate to their respective nature. The phenomenon of game proves, in fact, that men are able to free themselves from the immediate grip exerted by nature on them and can thus make their choices independently from that complex of inclinations, sensitive tendencies and desires that is present in each individual. For this reason, men are not only able to differentiate the ways in which they fulfill their natural desires and to choose among them, but they can also defer or suspend their satisfaction, as Cusanus explains with the examples of absti-

²² As Borsche has incisively written, «die Verbindung von Endlichkeit und Freiheit enthält die Möglichkeit und zugleich die Aufforderung zum Spiel» (Borsche: Spielen, 239).

nence, chastity and suicide: «But our nature can never impose on our spirit any necessity; but well can our spirit [impose necessity] on our nature, as is evident with respect to good, in case of abstinence and in chastity, and with respect of evil, when we sin against our nature and when the despairing lay hands on themselves and kill themselves» (I 36, 6-10).

These examples mean to highlight that men, like all other living beings, have a nature, but they *are not* simply their nature. Their nature is rather something that men *have*, in the sense that, by virtue of their intellectual soul, they can freely relate to it. For this reason, men can realize the essential laws of their nature, or they can suspend or even break them, as in the extreme case of suicide, in which the most fundamental of all natural impulses, that of self-preservation, is overcome. For, this inner distance of man from his own nature discloses that space of freedom which is essential to every cognitive act and without which no form of play, no artistic creation and, in general, no «*inventio novi*» would be possible. For this reason, if game, as it is said at the beginning of the dialogue, is an activity that only men are able to perform, this is why animals, as Cusanus explains now, «lack the freedom that we possess» (I 34, 6-13).

IV. *Dialectic of Freedom*

What I have said so far, however, is only a part of the story. For, there is dialectic of freedom that is well highlighted by the bowling-game invented by Cusanus. As we have seen, man's inner distance from his own nature opens up that space of freedom, thanks to which man is not simply an exemplar of a certain biological species, but can be in the world as an autonomous principle of his choices and actions (as a subject able to «move himself», according to the Platonic doctrine of soul, which is discussed at length in the first book of *De ludo globi*)²³. Another idea is connected to this concept of freedom. We find it, for example, in the *Sermo* 168: the inner distance of man from his own nature discloses that space of freedom thanks to which man can not only invent new things in the field of arts, techniques or games, but he can also give a new shape to himself – something, this, that no animal is able to do. Man, we could say, is an «open» nature, infinitely plastic, and for this reason he is radically different from all the other beings we call «natural». In fact, while the place that all living beings have in the world and their activities are determined and fixed by their respective nature, man is the only being who, by virtue of his freedom,

²³ Cf. *De ludo*, I 25, 1 ff.

can change himself, can improve, can progress²⁴. Man has more than just a nature. Unlike all other natural beings, man has a history. One would feel tempted to refer also to Cusanus what has been written about Pico: as far as man is concerned, one should not speak of nature, but of «choice that engages»²⁵. Existence precedes essence. Thomas Leinkauf, in his *Grundriss Philosophie des Humanismus und der Renaissance*, has recently dedicated a chapter to the philosophy of freedom of the Renaissance entitled as follows: «Sein als Folge von Freiheit: Entscheidung (*liberum arbitrium*)»²⁶. Can we include Cusanus in this chapter? «Sic et non», we could answer; freedom, in fact, has its own dialectic.

In his «late» philosophy Cusanus elaborated a «metaphysics of power» (Brüntrup)²⁷, whose intent is not only theological. Cusanus is not only looking for a new «nomen Dei»; he wants, at the same time, to re-think the categories of traditional ontology, that is, the concepts of «species», «individual», «nature», «essentia» or «substantia»²⁸. In this sense, in *De venatione sapientiae* (XXVIII 84-85) Cusanus explains: what establishes the belonging of a group of individuals to a species is not so much a certain essential form that exists «actu» in them, as, rather, the «horizon» of ontological possibilities that they have in common²⁹; that horizon which circumscribes the «space» within which each of them can realize his being and that, for this reason, is, at the same time, the limit of its finiteness (cfr. XXVIII 83-84). So, each individual is characterized by his own particular, determined or «contract» way to realise the «set» of ontological possibilities enclosed in the «posse fieri hominis», and in this consists his *nature*, his *substantia* or his *essentia*³⁰. Thus, what traditional

²⁴ Cf. Sermo CLXVIII, n. 8, 13-18: «Et quia (sc. natura intellectualis) est libera potentia, potest fieri melior. Nulla natura alia potest fieri melior ex se, sed est id quod est sub necessitate, quae ipsam sic tenet. Sola intellectualis natura habet in se principia (sc. libera potentia), per quae potest fieri melior, et ita Deo similior et capacior». Cf. also Sermo CLXXVIII, n. 8, 5 ff. («chitarra viva liberi arbitrii...potest se nobilitare»); De vis., IV 11.

²⁵ Castelli: La signification de l'humanisme, 16; cf. De Lubac: Pic de la Mirandole, 49 ff.

²⁶ Leinkauf: Grundriss, 675 ff.

²⁷ Brüntrup: Können und Sein, 63.

²⁸ Cf. Meier-Oeser: Potentia, 247-250; Maaßens: Metaphysik, 234 ff.

²⁹ Cf. *De ven. sap.*, XXVIII 85, 4-6: «Species, igitur, cum sit specifica determinatio ipsius posse fieri, ostendit illa eiusdem speciei, quorum posse fieri in idem, si fieret, terminaretur».

³⁰ Cf. *De ven. sap.*, XXVIII 114, 14-15: «sed est determinatio ipsius posse fieri singulariter ad hoc contracta, quae est ipsius, quod sic factum est, natura est substantia»; cfr. 116, 1 ff.; XXIX 88, 10-13: «Tu enim non es grammaticus, rethor, logicus, philosophus, mathematicus, theologus, mechanicus et talia omnia, quae tamen, cum

ontology calls nature, substance or essence becomes a dynamic concept: the nature or essence of a man is the set of possibilities that he realizes. And just as the «quiditas» of every creature is a «modus apparitionis» or a «modus essendi» of the divine «posse ipsum» (*De apice th.*, 9, 9 ff.; 14, 8; 14, 13; 14, 36; 27, 28), so man is what he does with himself. For this reason, man is an image of God. In this sense, we could say that «esse sequitur posse», or that «Sein ist eine Folge der Entscheidung», according to Leinkauf's formula.

However, we are not the divine «posse absolutum», which is «omne posse», «omne quod esse ac fieri posse» (*De poss.*, 16, 5; 25, 6-8) The «posse» of every man is always limited. As far as Cusanus is concerned, one could not say what Garin wrote about Pico: «Man is everything because he can be everything»³¹. As Cusanus says in *De possest* (XXXIX 88, 8-13), «we cannot be everything». In fact, we «can» only that determined and delimited complex of possibilities that «precedes» us and that is «offered» or «given» to us. From this point of view, we have to say that «posse sequitur esse»; or, as Cusanus says in *De venatione sapientiae*, our «posse fieri» has already its «initiatum esse», it has an «initium» that does not depend on us and that we cannot have at our disposal. And just as it has an «initium», so our freedom has a «telos», just as the «ludus globi» has a «center».

As I said, there is in fact dialectic of freedom. By virtue of his intellectual soul, man can relate freely to his nature. According to Cusanus, however, such a freedom, such a inner distance of man from his own nature, is made possible by the fact that our intellectual soul is originally characterized by an orientation to the good («iudicum concreatum»), which is also the end of the whole of creation. Thus man, by virtue of his distance from nature, is the only being who can lead nature properly to itself: only by man, in fact, the end which the whole of creation tends to can be recognized and freely willed. This is why God has placed in the world beings endowed not only with intellect, but also with freedom, as Cusanus says in his first *Sermon*³². By virtue of this original orientation to the good man has a «posse liberae voluntatis», which precedes and makes possible every «posse eligere» (*De ap. theor.*, 23, 1 ff.): that is, it makes our will free to want and choose.

sis homo, fieri potes. Posse fieri hominem licet in te sit actu modo tali, uti es, determinatum, quae determinatio est essentia tua».

³¹ Garin: L'umanesimo italiano, 124.

³² *Sermo* I, n. 15, 9-12: «Deus hominem [...] donis ornavit, libero arbitrio et ratione, ut per rationem ortum suum et sui conditorem intelligeret et per liberum arbitrium amaret [...]».

This theme is introduced in the second book of *De ludo globi*: Cusanus takes up a characteristic idea of the Augustinian tradition and explains that, at the basis of the choices that all men make, however different and changeable they may be, there is a first and original «intentio» consisting in the desire to come to know that good which all beings desire (II 101, 16-18). This original «intentio», which moves all our life paths in a similar way to the action exercised by the motionless Motor of which Aristotle spoke (II 98, 1-4; 99, 1-100, 9), is the «vector» of our freedom and the ultimate goal to which it is directed (II 70, 11-14).

This link between autonomy and teleology is one of the main meanings of «ludus globi» and its «lex». The phenomenon of game, in fact, teaches us to keep together these two complementary aspects: the reference to a «center», which we all aim to in playing the «game» of our life, as well as «each player aims to reach the center of the circle» (I 55, 5-6), and the different and individual paths along which men approach it, in accordance with their different personal and social stories, with the set of images of life that are connected to them. This is why, as Cusanus explains to John, between the «centre» of the playing field and the point from which the players throw the ball, «there is an infinite number of places and houses» (I 51, 8).

Cusa's desire to keep these two aspects together, which in the philosophical tradition have often remained separate, explains why in *De ludo globi* Cusanus seeks to connect the Aristotelian ethics of virtues³³, and the apriorism of values characteristic of his philosophy of mind. «Each man is his own bowling-ball, curved differently from any other bowling-ball» (I 54, 11-12). For this reason, as the ability of a player consists in «rectifying» little by little his throwing style, in order to minimize the inclination of the ball he has, so «it is necessary that each man, by exerting himself, controls the inclinations and tendencies of his own bowling-ball», so that «the curvature of his ball does not prevent» him from reaching the center to which all men tend (I 54, 13-19). This work of gradual «control» and «rectification» of our inclinations is what we can achieve through the practice of virtues (I 54, 1-2). For, taking up the traditional Aristotelian doctrine, Cusanus explains that the task of virtues is to lead, through the exercise, «to the education of a good habit», so that our inclinations and our tendencies are oriented to the good (56, 2-6). In this sense, as Aristotle did, Cusanus repeatedly insists, as he also does in his *Sermons*, on the importance «of paying attention to the beginning of the movement» (55, 18-56, 1), that is to the education of our moral character; the latter, in fact,

³³ As for the ethics of virtues in Cusanus, cf. Hopkins: *Die Tugenden*, 9-39; Senger: *Gerechtigkeit*, 141-161; Mandrella: *Viva imago*, 149 ff.

once it has been developed, becomes a «second nature», as Aristotle said, which heavily influences our choices and our actions.

The description of the dynamics of moral action given by Cusanus in the final pages of *De ludo globi* is not based, however, only on the traditional Aristotelian doctrine. This is what comes out from the discussion on the topic of «fortuna» that concludes the first book of *De ludo globi*. Facing this theme, characteristic of 15th century humanistic thought³⁴, Cusanus explains that by «fortuna» – in whatever way it is understood (fate, chance, astral influences) – can be conditioned to some extent the external circumstances of action, which do not depend entirely on the subject acting. The moral intention, on the other hand, is always «in our power» (I 55, 11-13). For this reason, every time we act in the different situations of existence, we can always orient our will in one direction or another (I 58, 1-9), just as the thrust given to the ball always depends on the will of the players, even though the conditions of the playing field and the external circumstances in which the throw takes place («caeli, stellarum et aeris atque temporis mutationem»: I 7, 10), do not depend on them (I 56, 7-10).

Such a freedom of will, such a «posse liberae voluntatis», precedes and makes possible the very choice of ethical virtues and hence the education, through their exercise and practice, of good «habit». According to Cusanus, this «posse liberae voluntatis» depends on the fact that man has an innate knowledge of moral values, thanks to which he can formulate his judgments and can orient himself in his actions (I 58, 2-15)³⁵; a knowledge

³⁴ Cf. Cuzzo: «Ludus globi» un «Ludus vitae», 129-146.

³⁵ Cf. *De mente*, IV 78, 2-5: «Nam clare experimus spiritum in mente nostra loquentem et iudicantem hoc bonum, hoc iustum, hoc verum, et nos reprehendentem, si declinamus a iusto. Quam loquelam et quod iudicium nequaquam didicit, sed sibi connotatum est». In Cusanus often occurs the idea, according to which we acquire knowledge of what is good and what is evil not from experience, but by virtue of an «iudicium connotatum» (for this reason, our intellect can also be labelled as a «living statera»: *Sermo CCXLIII*, n. 6, 9-11). In this sense, cf. *De ven. sap.*, XIX 54, 17-22; XX 58, 13-18: «Recte sapiens Socrates comperit nihil nos certius scire quam ea quae laudabilia sunt, et monuit ad illa ceteris dimissis tamquam superfluis et incertis solum nostrum studium converti. Laudabilibus enim moribus suasit insudandum, quorum ex nobis scientiam haurire possumus et ex consuetudine perficientem habitum acquirere et ita continue fieri meliores». As examples of «laudabilia», whose knowledge we draw from ourselves, a few lines earlier were cited: «bonitas, virtus, veritas, honestas, aequitas» (58, 3). See also *De aequal.*, 10, 10-14: «Haec omnia explicat ex propria virtute notionali. Et de omnibus per se iudicat, sicut de iustitia causarum per notionalem suam iustitiam, quae est consubstantialis sibi, quia est ratio iustitiae, per quam iudicat iustum et iniustum». In *Comp.* X 33, 10; 34, 3, Cusanus expresses the same view also

which man originally has and which he does not draw either from experience or from the historical, cultural and social context in which he lives and which is therefore not acquired either through the practice of right behaviours, as in Aristotelian ethics. As Cusanus will repeat in the *Compendium*, «man possesses the innate forms of the virtues of justice and equity, which are not perceptible with the senses, in such a way that he can choose good and become virtuous» (VI 17, 16-20). This innate faculty of moral judgment («iudicium concreatum») does not depend on any of the conditions which may influence our actions nor on the moral character of which Aristotle spoke and which he regarded as a «second nature». This «iudicium concreatum» is rather a faculty of the «unconditional»: it is the original capacity of our mind to recognize and appreciate («aestimatio valoris»: *De ludo*, II 113, 11-12; 114, 1 ff.) what is «good and precious» in and for itself (II 110, 7), and thus «what is praiseworthy» («laudabilis»: *De ven sap.*, XX 58, 13 ff.), and to take it as a criterion for our choices. Such a original capacity of mind is what, in *De apice theoriae*, Cusanus calls «posse liberae voluntatis», which precedes every right «posse eligere» and on which every right «posse eligere» is founded: it is thanks to it, in fact, that in all the circumstances in which we happen to choose and to act, despite the character we have acquired and all natural, social or cultural conditioning, we can always and again freely choose the good.

referring to the words of Psalm 4, 7: «Lumen vultus Dei super nos signatum»; in *De ven. sap.*, XV 42, 3-5, this Psalm, together with the Platonic metaphor of light, is used to illustrate the «a priori» structure of all human knowledge. As for the presence in Cusanus of an «ethical apriorism», cf. Kremer: *Das kognitive und affektive Apriori*, 103-146; Mandrella: *Viva Imago*, 100 sqq. In Cusanus there is also an «aesthetic apriorism»; in this sense, see *Sermo CCXLIII*, n. 18, 1-20: «Experimur autem in omnibus ratione vigen tibus iudicium pulchri esse. Dicunt enim hanc figuram circula-rem pulchram, illam rosam pulchram, hoc lignum pulchrum, hanc cantilenam pulchram. Unde nisi iudex, qui est intellectus, in se haberet speciem pulchritudinis omnem sensi bilem pulchritudinem complicantem, non posset iudicium facere inter pulchra, dicendo hoc esse pulchrum, hoc pulchrius. Quare intellectus est quaedam universalis pulchritudo seu species specierum, cum species sint contractae pulchritudines, et quasi ignis est in se complicans omnium calidorum formam et speciem, sic intellectus est vis complicativa omnium specierum intelligibilium. Intellectualis enim natura, quae est prima pulchri irradiatio, in eo quod est Dei imago, qui est ipsa pulchritudo antecedenter, in se complicat omnes naturales pulchritudines, quae per species in universo explicantur». On this, cf. Santinello: *Il pensiero di Nicolò*, 238 ff.; Gadamer: *Nikolaus von Kues*, 48.

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