Pico della Mirandola

NEW ESSAYS

edited by

M. V. DOUGHERTY

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This volume provides a comprehensive presentation of the philosophical work of the fifteenth-century Renaissance thinker Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. In essays specially commissioned for this book, a distinguished group of scholars presents the central topics and texts of Pico's literary output. Best known as the author of the celebrated "Oration on the Dignity of Man," a magnificent speech originally intended to introduce a debate of 900 theses to be held in Rome before the pope, the College of Cardinals, and an international group of scholars, Pico also wrote several other prominent works. They include an influential diatribe against astrology, an ambitious metaphysical treatise attempting to reconcile Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysical views, and writings on a range of subjects such as magic, Kabbalah, the church, the philosophy of religion, and the philosophy of knowledge. The first volume of its kind in English, this collection of essays will be of value not only to advanced students and specialists of late medieval and Renaissance thought but also to those interested in Italian humanism and Renaissance Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism.

M. V. Dougherty is assistant professor of philosophy at Ohio Dominican University. His research in the history of philosophy includes work on the thinking of Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle, and René Descartes as well as Pico della Mirandola.

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK
Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York
www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521847360

First published in print format 2007

ISBN-13 978-0-511-35291-1 eBook (Adobe Reader)
ISBN-10 0-511-35291-3 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-84736-0 hardback
ISBN-10 0-521-84736-2 hardback

Contents

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Pico della Mirandola

1

Introduction

M. V. Dougherty

Evaluations of the intellectual contributions of the Italian Renaissance philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94) are surprisingly varied. Large-scale summations of the merits of his philosophizing bring a diversity of results even from those well versed in Pico's works. In 1934, prior to the great explosion of scholarly studies that occurred during the later part of the twentieth century, Lynn Thorndike would lament that "one cannot but feel that the importance of Pico della Mirandola in the history of thought has often been grossly exaggerated."[1] Three decades later, however, Frances Yates would complete her account of Pico with the conclusion that "the profound significance of Pico della Mirandola in the history of humanity can hardly be overestimated."[2] The vast disparity between excessively laudatory and sharply opprobrious appraisals from historians of the past century should not detract from the fact that Pico's work has garnered the interest of famous European intellectuals throughout the centuries, eliciting evaluations from thinkers as dissimilar as Desiderius Erasmus,[3] Niccolò

[1] Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Experimental Science*, vol. 4, *Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), 485. The nadir of assessments of Pico's literary corpus may be the one present in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, where it is alleged that Pico's works "cannot now be read with much interest," in vol. 19, ed. R. S. Pearl and W. H. DePuy (Chicago: Werner Company, 1894), 81. A similar assessment is given by Nesca A. Robb in *Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1935), 61–2: "There are writers who live though their works die, and Pico is one of them. . . . [I]t is Pico himself rather than his work that is still vital."

[2] Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 116.

[3] See Marc Laureys, "The Reception of Giovanni Pico in the Low Countries," in *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Convegno internazionale di studi nel cinquecentesimo anniversario della morte (1494–1994)*, ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1997), 625–40,

Machiavelli,[4] Johannes Kepler,[5] Pierre Gassendi,[6] and Voltaire,[7] all of whom to some degree bestow praise upon this figure of the Renaissance. Among literary notables, John Donne[8] and John Milton[9] were readers of Pico's writings, and perhaps even William Shakespeare can be added among those influenced by his thought.[10] Even Martin Luther would cast a sympathetic glance when noting Pico's difficulties with church authorities,[11] and Blaise Pascal left evidence of having read some of Pico's works.[12] Thomas More was the first to introduce Pico to English audiences on a large scale with his early sixteenth-century translations of Pico's letters and religious *opuscula*, and his liberally edited translation of Gianfrancesco Pico's *Vita* of Pico has been regarded by some historians as the first English biography to see print.[13] The greatest extant adulations of Pico's achievements, however, are from those who knew him best; his contemporaries and early apologists did not appear to have exercised much restraint when crafting honorary epithets and titles while extolling his intellectual virtues.[14]

at 629, and A. H. T. Levi, "Erasmus and the Humanist Ideal," *The Heythrop Journal* 19 (1978): 243–55, at 245 and 251.

4 See Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, trans. Laura F. Banfield and Harvey Mansfield Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 361.

5 See Sheila J. Rabin, "Kepler's Attitude toward Pico and the Anti-Astrology Polemic," *Renaissance Quarterly* 50 (1997): 750–70.

6 See Brian Vickers, "Critical Reactions to the Occult Sciences during the Renaissance" in *The Scientific Enterprise: The Bar-Hillel Colloquium: Studies in History, Philosophy, and Sociology of Science*, ed. Edna Ullmann-Margalit (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1992), 4:43–92, at 75.

7 For a discussion of Voltaire's assessments of Pico, see Henri de Lubac, *Pic de la Mirandole: Études et discussions* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1974), 13.

8 See Patrick Grant, "Donne, Pico, and Holy Sonnet XII," *La Revue de l'Association des Humanites* 24 (1973): 39–42.

9 See Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr. "Pico and Milton: A Gloss on *Areopagitica*," *English Language Notes* 9 (1971): 108–10.

10 See Frank M. Caldiero, "The Source of Hamlet's 'What a Piece of Work is a Man!'" *Notes and Queries* 196 (1951): 421–4.

11 See *Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesammtausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1883), 1:574, 4:183.

12 See Blaise Pascal, *Provinciale XVII*, in *Pensées and the Provincial Letters*, trans. W. F. Trotter and Thomas M'Crie (New York: Random House, 1941), 586.

13 The best account of Thomas More's engagement with Pico is Anthony S. G. Edwards's introduction to Thomas More, *English Poems, Life of Pico, The Last Things*, vol. 1 of *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, ed. Anthony S. G. Edwards, Clarence H. Miller, and Katherine Gardiner Rodgers (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), xxxvii–lix.

14 For example, Pico's close friend, the poet and scholar Angelo Poliziano, referred to Pico in his letters as the Divine Pico (*sacer Picus*), a phoenix (*phoenix*), a demigod (*heros*), the light of all learning (*lux omnium doctrinarum*), and "than whom no other mortal

Without doubt, therefore, Pico has long been recognized as an important figure in Renaissance thought, although some historians have debated whether Pico is best viewed as a representative intellectual from an age replete with intellectuals or as an exceptional figure deserving of particular admiration. No matter which account is favored, it is uncontroversial that Pico was surrounded by and interacted with the leading figures of his age. At times this was a matter of his own choosing, but not always; it can be said, for example, that his fortunes fell with the condemnation by one pope and rose with his rehabilitation by another. The variety of genres representing Pico's works also testifies to his influential cast of friends and acquaintances; his corpus includes a compendious diatribe against astrology, an ambitious metaphysical treatise, literary and biblical commentaries, a speech, a collection of *conclusiones* or theses, and a vast epistolary collection, and each work is intimately associated with a major personality of Pico's day.

Pico's famous *Oratio*, arguably the most anthologized text of Renaissance philosophy, has been touted at times as the key text of Renaissance humanism, yet it was merely intended to serve as the preface to a public disputation in Rome before the Roman pontiff of his *900 Theses* (*Conclusiones*), a wide-ranging compilation of views concerning philosophy, theology, and other disciplines. A quickly penned defense, Pico's *Apologia*, exhibited no contrition and spectacularly failed to persuade Roman authorities of the merits of his theses. His earliest philosophical work, the *Commento*, used the pretext of a commentary on a poem of Girolamo Benivieni (1453–1542) as an occasion for a philosophical examination of Neoplatonic metaphysics, and it contained an implicit critique of the views espoused by his friend, the great Florentine Neoplatonist philosopher and translator Marsilio Ficino (1433–99). Pico's brief metaphysical treatise, *On Being and the One* (*De ente et uno*), was dedicated to Angelo Poliziano (1454–94), a poet and scholar of the Medici circle. In this work, Pico discussed the question of the relationship of being and unity in light of the traditional Aristotelian and Platonic views, and he

is more beautiful or more eminent in all branches of learning" (*quo nec pulchrior alter mortalium, nec in omnibus arbitror doctrinis excellentior*). See Angelo Poliziano, *Letters*, ed. and trans. Shane Butler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 1:118–19, 36–7, 134–5, 193. Paolo Cortesi (1465/71–1510) used Pico as a model for his handbook on cardinals – *De cardinalatu* – and praised him with such epithets as "most learned of the Latins" (*doctissimus Latinorum*) and "source of knowledge" (*fons disciplinae*). For texts and a discussion, see John F. D'Amico, "Paolo Cortesi's Rehabilitation of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 44 (1982): 37–51, at 48.

resurrected the ancient thesis that Aristotle and Plato were not opposed on the question of the relation between being and unity. Of Pico's correspondence, the most famous letter came from an exchange with Ermolao Barbaro (1454–93) on the relationship of philosophy and rhetoric. A "reply" to Pico, for a long time attributed to Philip Melanchthon, would surface to propel the debate for new generations. Pico's *Heptaplus*, dedicated to Lorenzo de' Medici (1449–92), was a cosmological work that took the form of a sevenfold commentary on the first portion of Genesis. Pico's last works, including short religious pieces and other biblical commentaries, are most often seen in light of the influence of Pico's close friend in his later life, the fiery religious reformer Girolamo Savonarola (1452–98), who would ultimately clothe Pico in the habit of the Dominican order and give Pico's funeral oration upon his untimely death. Pico's massive anti-astrological work, the posthumously published *Disputations against Divinatory Astrology* (*Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*), also comes from this later period and has often been championed by some historians as a key work in the struggle of scientific thought over superstition and perhaps even the beginning of the scientific revolution.[15] Counted among Pico's associates, therefore, are some the greatest figures of Italian Renaissance culture, and his involvement with them provided an important catalyst for the shaping of the parts of his philosophical corpus.

In recent times, scholars working with Pico's philosophical writings have depended upon the magisterial editions of several of Pico's works edited by Eugenio Garin in the 1940s and 1950s.[16] For those texts left unedited by Garin, scholars have relied largely on modern reprintings of sixteenth-century editions, which themselves were indebted to the 1496 *editio princeps* of Pico's *Opera* edited and published by Pico's nephew and biographer, Gianfrancesco Pico.[17] In the last two decades or so, however,

[15] See Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1964), 68.

[16] See Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno, e Scritti vari*, ed. Eugenio Garin (Florence: Vallecchi, 1942), and Pico della Mirandola, *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*, ed. Eugenio Garin, 2 vols. (Florence: Vallecchi, 1946–52). Among his many important studies on Pico, Garin's *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Vita et dottrina* (Florence: Felice le Monnier, 1937) is particularly valuable.

[17] The Basel 1572 edition of the *Opera omnia* has been reprinted as Joannes Picus Mirandulanus, *Opera omnia* (Turin: Bottega D'Erasmo, 1971), and the Basel 1557–73 edition has been reprinted as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Opera omnia*, 2 vols. (Olms, Germany: Hildesheim, 1969 [repr., 2005]). Both editions contain Gianfrancesco Pico's detailed biography of Giovanni Pico. Gianfrancesco Pico's 1496 edition did not include Pico's *900 Theses* or the *Commento*, but they were added in later versions of the *Opera omnia*.

a significant number of new editions of Pico's works have appeared, at times supplemented with modern translations, and they collectively testify to the growing interest in Pico's work.[18] This increase in editions and translations has been matched by a rise in the amount and quality of scholarly commentary on Pico's literary corpus. The study of this secondary literature on Pico has been greatly enhanced with the recent appearance of substantive bibliographies that reliably catalogue the secondary literature on Pico along with the printed editions and translations of Pico's works,[19] and reference works like these join the other standard tools at the disposal of the contemporary student of Pico.[20] Special mention should be made also of significant collaborative projects in Pico studies. Proceedings from conferences marking the fifth centenaries of Pico's birth and death featured essays from prominent historians of the Renaissance period.[21] Further, in addition to online electronic editions of Pico's *Oratio* and the *900 Theses* with an accompanying collaborative commentary, hosted by Brown University and the University of Bologna, there has appeared a series dedicated to editing and translating the volumes composing Pico's Kabbalistic library collection.[22] Additionally,

[18] Of special interest may be the forthcoming bilingual publication of Pico's *Oratio*, *900 Theses*, *Apologia*, and *Letters* in several volumes of the I Tatti Renaissance Library series from Harvard University Press.

[19] *Pichiana: Bibliografia delle edizioni e degli studi*, ed. Leonardo Quaquarelli and Zita Zanardi (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2005). The last portion of this volume (pages 335–410) consists of a bibliography of secondary literature and has been reprinted with the identification of the co-editors. See Leonardo Quaquarelli and M. V. Dougherty, *Bibliografia XIX e XX Secolo* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2007). English-speaking readers may also consult an electronic bibliography titled *Pico in English: A Bibliography of the Works of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494) with a List of Studies and Commentaries* (2003–), found at: http://www.mvdougherty.com/pico.htm.

[20] An important reference work for students of Pico is Pearl Kibre, *The Library of Pico della Mirandola* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936; repr., New York: AMS Press, 1966), which reproduces the inventory of Pico's legendary library and discusses his indebtedness to classical and medieval sources. More recently, a CD-ROM database of Pico's works has been published as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Opere Complete*, ed. Francesco Bausi (Rome: Lexis Progetti Editoriali, 2000).

[21] *L'Opera e il pensiero di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola nella storia dell'Umanismo*, 2 vols. (Florence: Nella Sede dell'Instituto, 1965); *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Convegno internazionale di studi nel cinquecentesimo anniversario della morte (1494–1994)*, ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini, 2 vols. (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1997).

[22] For the *Oratio*, see: http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/pico/. The *900 Theses* can be found at: http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/pico/. The first volumes of the series titled "The Kabbalistic Library of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola" have been published as *The Great Parchment: Flavius Mithridates' Latin Translation, the Hebrew Text, and an English Version*, ed. Giulio Busi, Simonetta M. Bondoni, and Saverio Campanni (Turin: Nino Aragno, 2004), and *The Book of Bahir: Flavius Mithridates' Latin Translation, the Hebrew Text, and an English Version*, ed. Saverio Campanini (Turin: Nino Aragno, 2005).

the appearance of philological studies on Pico,[23] as well as historiographical accounts,[24] suggests that the present state of *studi pichiani* is a healthy one and that interest in this Renaissance thinker will continue to grow.

The present collection of essays seeks to assess the philosophical merit of the work of the Count of Mirandola. Pico's legendary erudition and command of a variety of disciplines have made the mastery of his literary corpus a formidable task for any individual. The format chosen for this volume is a joint approach by scholars working in the fields of philosophy and intellectual history. Established authorities in the study of Renaissance philosophy as well as younger scholars were invited to contribute; it is hoped that, for English-speaking readers, the results will serve as a reliable guide to the wide range of the subject matter covered in Pico's literary corpus, including works beyond the well-known and celebrated *Oratio*. Additionally, the volume seeks to acquaint readers with the scholarly landscape of Pico studies over the last century as well as indicate new departure points for appreciating Pico's place in the history of philosophy. To this end, the collection comprises nine chapters, each highlighting an essential element of Pico's extant writings.

In her contribution to this volume, Jill Kraye discusses the famous epistolary confrontation between Pico and Ermolao Barbaro on the age-old question of the relationship between philosophy and rhetoric. Pico's contribution to this debate – a June 3, 1485, letter to Barbaro – has puzzled commentators, because while it contains some sharp arguments championing the superiority of plain scholastic philosophical Latin over embellished rhetorical Latin, the letter is written in a manner that is rhetorically proficient and replete with classical allusions. This apparent contrast between the style and the substance of the letter has led to opposing interpretations of Pico's intentions in penning his contribution to this ancient debate, one that is exacerbated by Pico's use of the rhetorical convention of prosopopoeia for the larger part of the letter,

[23] Francesco Bausi, *Nec rhetor neque philosophus: Fonti, lingua e stile nelle prime opera latine de Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1484–87)* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1996). See also *Lexique de la prose latine de la renaissance*, ed. René Hoven et al., 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

[24] William G. Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Symbol of his Age: Modern Interpretations of a Renaissance Philosopher* (Geneva: Libraire Droz, 1981); Brian P. Copenhaver, "Magic and the Dignity of Man: De-Kanting Pico's *Oration*," in *The Italian Renaissance in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Allen J. Grieco et al. (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2002), 295–320.

where an imagined scholastic philosopher condemns the superficiality of rhetoric and champions instead the search for and presentation of unadorned truth by philosophers. That Pico would use the conventions of rhetoric to criticize rhetoric may appear as a kind of performative contradiction, since standard rhetorical techniques are employed in an apparent criticism of the discipline. Kraye approaches the Pico-Barbaro debate by locating Pico's retort in the larger context of the views of Latin defended both by Barbaro and the humanist Angelo Poliziano and in the context of other letters penned by Pico. In approaching the letter to Barbaro, Kraye finds an interpretive solution in Pico's *Oratio*, where Pico appealed to the resources of humanism to defend and praise scholastic philosophy and theology. The same approach is present in the letter to Barbaro; Pico joins scholastic substance with the rhetorical humanist style to offer a persuasive account of the value of philosophy and theology.

Paul Richard Blum examines Pico's forays into theology and the subsequent reactions Pico elicited from church officials. Focusing especially on those 13 of the 900 theses that were selected by Pope Innocent VIII's investigating commission as either outright heretical or at least savoring of heresy and examining key elements of Pico's hastily written defense of his orthodoxy, the spirited *Apologia*, Blum proposes several principles that help to explain the seemingly paradoxical interaction between Pico and the church. Noting that the 13 controversial theses give the appearance of being a random collection insofar as they range over a variety of topics – including issues in magic, Christology, worship, and epistemology – Blum offers an interpretation that maintains that the investigating church commission was seeking to uphold a barrier between natural philosophy and theology and that Pico's collection of theses – at least the 13 controversial theses – did not uphold this division between disciplines. Blum examines the notable variety of techniques that Pico uses in the *Apologia* to defend his views, which include his selective use of scholastic writers, his defense of a "hidden linkage" among his theses, an argumentative procedure that alleges the absurdity of a contrary position for the sake of lending plausibility to an original position, the difficulty of identifying true heresies, and, most importantly, Pico's contention that the loose manner of proposing issues for disputation is different in kind from the rigorous manner that attends ordinary academic writing. Ultimately the commission members' failure with regard to the last item signals their failure to appreciate Pico's early attempts to explore the relationship between language and thought, a theme that Pico continues in later writings. In the latter part of his paper, Blum examines this theme

in the context of Pico's last works, focusing especially on Pico's biblical commentaries.

Michael Sudduth treats several of Pico's works from the standpoint of contemporary philosophy of religion. While noting that such an approach to Pico's writings may strike some readers as anachronistic, Sudduth argues that many of Pico's explicit concerns overlap with pressing issues within contemporary discussions. The paper explores Pico's rational reflections on religious belief and considers the relation of this activity to Pico's larger philosophical outlook; along these lines Pico is presented as a philosopher of the Christian religion. After examining the *De ente et uno* and the *Heptaplus*, along with some texts from the *Oratio*, for evidence of Pico's manner of demarcating the disciplines of philosophy and theology, Sudduth emphasizes the religious contours of Pico's syncretic approach to various faith traditions, ultimately underscoring the latent medievalism that pervades Pico's outlook. He evaluates Pico's syncretic approach within a taxonomy provided by contemporary discussants of religious pluralism, ultimately concluding that Pico defends a Christosyncretism that does not treat all religious traditions as equal. Rather, Pico's syncretism is one that privileges the specifically Christian revelation of the divine. Although Pico's expressed desire to find truth in all traditions may seem to be congruent with contemporary philosopher of religion John Hick's defense of religious pluralism, Pico's motivations are ultimately those of a religious exclusivist, since Pico's syncretic project privileges Christianity and seeks affirmation of Christian truths in other traditions. Thus, Pico's Christian framework separates his syncretic project from the seemingly similar twentieth-century projects espoused by contemporary philosophers of religion.

In his contribution, Michael J. B. Allen presents Pico as a hermeneut working within the Platonic tradition. Noting Pico's broad Platonic education, Allen examines several works of Pico's for evidence of a methodological commitment to finding allegorical and figurative readings of ancient classical literary texts for the sake of discovering divine mysteries and veiled metaphysical principles. Such a hermeneutic approach presupposes that the ancient poetic texts contain hidden truths that could be analogous to Hebrew and Christian revelation. On this view, an interpreter versed in Christian and Platonic truths is in a uniquely privileged position to unpack the hidden metaphysical truths in the ancient classical texts, and Pico's interpretive exercises in his earliest work, the *Commento*, exhibit his success with such a mode of exegesis. After discussing the

complex history of the various versions and editions of the *Commento*, Allen lays out how Pico finds in Plato's account of the Orpheus myth a veiled discussion of the soul's relationship to Platonic ideas or forms and how, elsewhere in the work, Pico treats of the three hypostases of Neoplatonic metaphysics. Allen then turns to a later work, the *Heptaplus*, which is Pico's symbolizing account of the early chapters of Genesis, arguing that the work is "in effect, a triumph of Platonically inspired analysis." Pico considered Moses to be a Platonic philosopher of the highest order, and access to the philosophical principles hidden in the texts of Genesis requires a subtlety and inventiveness of interpretation that presupposes a background in Neoplatonic metaphysics. Allen completes the chapter with some conclusions concerning Pico's interpretation of the "protoplastic man" of the *Oratio* along Neoplatonic lines. Pico's hermeneutic approach to these texts – the *Commento*, the *Heptaplus*, and the *Oratio* – shows him to be an important speculative philosopher of his age.

In my own chapter, I locate Pico's ambitious plans for the 1487 Roman debate of the *900 Theses* within the trajectory of three medieval academic exercises and argue that such a placement allows one to approach afresh the problem of interpreting the *Oratio*, Pico's planned introductory speech that was to open the debate. A more traditional reading of Pico's Roman plans can help to narrow the competing interpretations that commentators have offered regarding the celebrated account of human nature in the *Oratio*. I argue, first, that rather than representing a late incarnation of a medieval *quaestiones quodlibetales* disputation, where a disputer would be compelled to entertain questions on any topic whatsoever, Pico's publication and promulgation of his theses prior to the debate models a *quaestiones disputatae* debate, where the issues to be debated were set forth and agreed upon in advance. Second, I focus on the fact that Pico's collection of theses largely comprises short texts or summaries of authorities of philosophy, theology, and other disciplines, and for this reason his work can profitably be considered as a late instance of *florilegia* writing or sentence collecting, patterned after such works as ancient philosophical compendia or even Peter Lombard's magisterial *Sententiae in IV libris distinctae*. Third, I emphasize Pico's commitment to classical dialectic, understood generally as the method of arguing on the basis of appeals to reputable opinions. When Pico's Roman project is located within these three traditions of the *quaestiones disputatae*, *florilegia* or sentence collecting, and dialectic, Pico's proposal seems less like an exercise in vainglory and more like traditional academic affair. Such an

approach mitigates the temptation to view Pico as a twenty-three-year-old prodigy whose proposal to debate before the pope, the College of Cardinals, and scholars is merely an exhibition of hubris on an unprecedented scale. Having placed the debate within these three historical contexts, I review the diverse approaches commentators have taken to Pico's famous account of human nature presented in the *Oratio*. Emphasizing that Pico's *Oratio* is largely a dialectical work, I suggest that it contains a highly original solution to a significant medieval problem concerning the possibility of human deification and conclude that the fact that the *Oratio*'s view of human nature was frequently plagiarized by papal orators and others in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries testifies to its early influence.

In her chapter, Sheila Rabin assesses Pico's views on the topics of magic and astrology, arguing that Pico's treatment of them in the *Conclusions*, *Heptaplus*, and *Disputations* significantly shaped the discipline of Renaissance natural philosophy. Underscoring the point that Pico's acquaintance with magic and astrology was essentially theoretical rather than practical, since Pico was an actual practitioner of neither, Rabin begins by reviewing the status of these disciplines in relation to the Renaissance university tradition. The practice of magic was not an explicit part of the university curriculum but was at times studied by students of medicine and philosophy. Magic divided into demonic magic and natural magic; the former was the often-condemned discipline that appealed to demonic powers, whereas the latter sought out hidden powers of nature and is often indiscernible from what is traditionally regarded as early modern scientific activity. Pico joined in the condemnations of demonic magic, but for him natural magic was a part of natural science. Rabin carefully explores Pico's views on the relationship between natural magic and Kabbalah, examining Pico's explicit claim that magic requires an annexation to Kabbalah to be efficacious.

The discipline of astrology also divided into two kinds, natural astrology, which concerned itself with medical and meteorological predictions, and judicial astrology, which concerned itself with human affairs. Rabin counsels that delimiting the two kinds of astrology can be difficult, since practices such as horoscopes and nativities appear to straddle both sides of the division. Demonstrating that Pico evolved from an initial qualified acceptance of some forms of astrology in the *Conclusions*, Rabin surveys the manifold types of argumentation that Pico employed against both judicial and natural astrology in the *Disputations*. She argues that the

motivation for Pico's critique lies in his theory of truth and his views concerning the historical genesis of error in addition to his general Christian apologetic concerns.

Pico's epistemic commitments form the subject matter of the penultimate contribution to this collection. Acknowledging that Pico's writings contain no systematic presentation of the subjects of mind and cognition, Carl Still nevertheless examines the major works for evidence of the philosopher's views. Ultimately the chapter defends a middle view between the standard interpretative approaches to Pico's thought on the subject; Still avoids the temptation of considering Pico's views on epistemology to be of little importance or of making epistemology the central theme of Pico's thought. Pico's comments on the subject, though scattered in a variety of works, can be profitably examined, and Still presents a textual account Pico's view of the process of cognition as the soul ascends through sensory, rational, intellectual, and divine forms of knowing. Although Pico's reflections in his various works cannot be distilled into a single theory of mind, he does transform the various traditions – Aristotelian, Platonic, and scholastic, among others – in a way that testifies both to Pico's sophistication and to his ambition.

The present volume concludes with Francesco Borghesi's discussion of the inseparability of Pico's life and literary works; two centuries of scholarship have provided evidence that the way one views the biographical facts profoundly affects the way one views the extant writings. Borghesi returns anew to the known elements of Pico's life and describes the intellectual climate of Pico's fifteenth-century education at the major centers of learning in Europe with notable figures of his day. Such a chronological approach to Pico's life demonstrates the coherence of the intellectual trajectory of Pico's literary projects.

In editing a volume of this sort one incurs many debts. First of all, I am grateful to the contributors to this collection; without their enthusiasm for the project and timely submissions, this volume could not have been possible. Second, I am grateful to my colleagues at Ohio Dominican University who have provided an environment well conducive to research, especially Larry Masek, Leo Madden, Quentin Colgan, Walter Kokernot, and Matthew Ponesse. ODU librarian Laura Masonbrink was particularly helpful in tracking down materials. Third, I am also indebted to the editorial and production staff for Cambridge University Press, including Beatrice Rehl, Sarah McColl, Jessica Schwartz, and Maggie Meitzler,

and especially to the late Terence Moore, for his support for the project and his helpful suggestions at its early stages. And finally, I would like to express my particular gratitude to my wife, Michelle, for her editorial advice and good cheer during this project from its earliest days to its completion.

2

Pico on the Relationship of Rhetoric and Philosophy

Jill Kraye

Ever since Plato wrote the *Gorgias*, philosophers have been trying to determine the proper relationship, if any, of their discipline to rhetoric.[1] Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's contribution to this long-running debate, particularly in a famous letter to his humanist friend Ermolao Barbaro (1454–93), has attracted considerable scholarly attention.[2] The letter is

[1] Samuel IJsseling, *Rhetoric and Philosophy in Conflict: An Historical Survey* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1976); Brian Vickers, "Territorial Disputes: Philosophy versus Rhetoric," in *Rhetoric Revalued: Papers from the International Society for the History of Rhetoric*, ed. Brian Vickers (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1982), 247–66.

[2] See the comment of Luca Bianchi, "Fra Ermolao Barbaro e Ludovico Boccadiferro: Qualche considerazione sulle trasformazioni della 'fisica medievale' nel Rinascimento italiano," *Medioevo* 29 (2004): 341–78, at 357 n. 45: "Sulla polemica fra il Barbaro e Pico la letteratura è sterminata." Among the most important recent studies are Francesco Bausi, "Il 'dissidio' del giovane Pico tra umanesimo e filosofia (1484–1487)," in *Pico, Poliziano e l'umanesimo di fine Quattrocento*, ed. Paolo Viti (Florence: Olschki, 1994), 31–58; Francesco Bausi, *Nec rhetor neque philosophus: Fonti, lingua e stile nelle prime opere latine di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1484–87)* (Florence: Olschki, 1996); Louis Valcke, *Pic de la Mirandole: Un itinéraire philosophique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2005), esp. chap. 4; W. G. Craven, "Style and Substance in the Early Writings of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," in *Rituals, Images, and Words: Varieties of Cultural Expression in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. F. W. Kent and Charles Zika (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 343–73; Martin L. McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: The Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), chap. 11; Jean-Claude Margolin, "Sur la conception humaniste du 'barbare': À propos de la controverse épistolaire entre Pic de la Mirandole et Ermolao Barbaro," in *Una famiglia veneziana nella storia: I Barbaro*, ed. Michela Marangoni and Manlio Pastore Stocchi (Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 1996), 234–76; Letizia Panizza, "Pico della Mirandola e il *De genere dicendi philosophorum* del 1485: L'encomio paradossale dei 'barbari' e la loro parodia," *I Tatti Studies* 8 (1999): 69–103; Letizia Panizza, "Pico della Mirandola's 1485 Parody of Scholastic Barbarians," in *Italy in Crisis: 1494*, ed. Jane Everson and Diego Zancani (Oxford: Legenda, 2000), 152–74; Brian Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric* (Oxford:

full of paradoxes and ambiguities, however. So if we are to understand Pico's true position on the relationship between rhetoric and philosophy, we cannot read it in isolation. This complex document needs to be interpreted in light of his other writings and activities. In addition, it is necessary to take into account not only the views of his sparring partner Barbaro but also those of another humanist, Angelo Poliziano (1454–94), a close friend of both men and a kindred spirit of Pico's.[3]

His enigmatic pronouncement on the "type of discourse appropriate to philosophers" came in a letter of June 3, 1485, written from Florence,[4] replying to a missive sent to him from Venice a month earlier by Barbaro. A Venetian patrician and humanist, Barbaro shared with Pico, nine years his junior, a keen interest in philosophy.[5] After studying Greek in Rome during the 1460s with the Byzantine humanist and philosopher Theodore Gaza, whom he greatly admired,[6] Barbaro went on to take degrees in arts and then civil and canon law at the University of Padua, where he also lectured on Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics* in the mid-1470s.[7] He wrote two compendia of Aristotelian philosophy, one on ethics, the other on natural philosophy. Both are spare summaries that do not reflect the

Clarendon Press, 1988), 184–96. For a list of earlier literature see Ermolao Barbaro and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Filosofia o eloquenza?* ed. Francesco Bausi (Naples: Liguori Editore, 1998), 182–6.

[3] On the shared intellectual interests and methods of Pico and Poliziano, see Anthony Grafton, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Trials and Triumphs of an Omnivore," in *Commerce with the Classics: Ancient Books and Renaissance Readers* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977), 93–134.

[4] In his reply to Pico's letter, Barbaro says that his correspondent had revived the old dispute and controversy "de genere dicendi philosophorum." *Epistolae, orationes et carmina*, ed. Vittore Branca, 2 vols. (Florence: Bibliopolis, 1943), 1:101–9, at 101. Pico, in a letter of 1491 to the Bolognese humanist Filippo Beroaldo, refers to his letter "ad Hermolaum de genere dicendi philosophorum." *Opera omnia* (Basel: Henricus Petri, 1557; repr., Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1969), 347.

[5] Vittore Branca, "Ermolao Barbaro and Late Quattrocento Venetian Humanism," in *Renaissance Venice*, ed. J. R. Hale (London: Faber & Faber, 1973), 218–43; see also the entries on Barbaro by E. Bigi in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1960), 6:95–9, and by Martin Lowry in *Contemporaries of Erasmus: A Biographical Register of the Renaissance and Reformation*, ed. Peter G. Bietenholz and Thomas B. Deutscher, 3 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985–7), 1:91–2.

[6] His Themistius translation, published in 1481, bore several dedications, all dated 1480. In the one to Pope Sixtus IV, Barbaro praises Gaza, "qui vir graecus latinos omnes in hoc munere scribendi interpretandique superavit. . . . Hic unus mihi certare cum vetustate ipsa visus est, hunc mihi quem colerem, quem imitarer proposui, ab huius scriptis adiutum me fateor et praedico." *Epistolae, orationes et carmina*, 1:7–10, at 9.

[7] Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Un codice padovano postillato da Francesco ed Ermolao Barbaro: Il manoscritto Plimpton 17 della Columbia University Library," in *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, 4 vols. (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1956–96), 1:337–53.

campaign he mounted in the 1480s to bring about a humanist reform of Aristotelianism.[8] Teaching courses in his own Venetian *palazzo*, Barbaro emphasized the importance of a philologically sound understanding of Aristotle's texts, studied in the original Greek or in accurate and eloquent new Latin versions which he himself intended to make,[9] though the only text he managed to translate was the *Rhetoric*. He criticized contemporary Aristotelians for knowing neither Latin nor Greek and wanted to convince them that "those who separate philosophy from eloquence are thought to be commonplace, insignificant and wooden philosophers."[10] Another part of his program was to replace medieval Latin and Arabic commentators, still widely used in university teaching of Aristotle, with ancient Greek ones. Like other humanists, Barbaro believed that the Greek commentators, closer in time to Aristotle, were the best interpreters of his thought.[11] By producing an elegant humanist translation of Themistius, Barbaro not only made the *Paraphrases* accessible to Aristotelian philosophers but also demonstrated that a subject as uncultivated, unrefined, and unsavory as natural philosophy was amenable to the propriety and lucidity of the Roman language.[12] He took on similar challenges when he rewrote two Latin works, a medieval logical treatise, *De sex principiis*, falsely ascribed to Gilbert of Poitiers,[13] and a tract on the mathematical

[8] Both works were posthumously published by his nephew Daniele Barbaro in 1544. On the *Compendium Ethicorum libri*, see my "Renaissance Commentaries on the *Nicomachean Ethics*," in Jill Kraye, *Classical Traditions in Renaissance Philosophy* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2002), 96–117, at 102–3. On the *Compendium scientiae naturalis ex Aristotele*, written in 1484, see Bianchi, "Fra Ermolao Barbaro," 351–62.

[9] See his letter of June 1, 1485, to Arnold di Bost, in Barbaro, *Epistolae, orationes et carmina*, 1:91–3, at 92: "Omnes Aristotelis libros converto, et quanta possum luce, proprietate, cultu exorno."

[10] See the dedicatory letter to Girolamo Donato of his Themistius translation (ibid., 1:16–17, at 17), in which he complains of those who "se peripateticos bonos appellent quia infantissimi sint nec latine loqui sciant nec graece. . . . Certe . . . daremus operam ut, quantum in nobis esset, recognoscerent se et intelligerent eos, qui a philosophia eloquentiam separant, minutos plebeiosque et plane ligneos philosophos haberi." On this letter, see Margolin, "Sur la conception humaniste," 239–47.

[11] Charles H. Lohr, "Renaissance Latin Translations of the Greek Commentators on Aristotle," in *Humanism and Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Jill Kraye and M. W. F. Stone (London: Routledge, 2000), 24–40.

[12] See the dedicatory letter to Sixtus IV, in Barbaro, *Epistolae, orationes et carmina*, 1:8: "Videbam nihil incultius, horridius, ineptius quam partem istam literaturae haberi. Placuit periclitari in Themistio an istaec quoque proprietatem et lucem romanae linguae recipierent." See also a letter to an unknown correspondent (ibid., 2:23): "Negabatur latine scribi posse physica; id nos editione themistiana facile coarguimus."

[13] See my "The Printing History of Aristotle in the Fifteenth Century: A Bibliographical Approach to Renaissance Philosophy," in Kraye, *Classical Traditions*, 189–211, at 200.

physics of the fourteenth-century Mertonian school, demonstrating that even such thorny and highly technical topics could be discussed in a polished Latin style.[14]

Barbaro's contempt for the rebarbative Latin of scholastic philosophy and his decided preference for the Greek commentators on Aristotle were shared by Poliziano.[15] In the academic year 1491–2, he began lecturing on Aristotle's *Organon* in the Florentine Studio and delivered an inaugural address in which he lamented that students read medieval Latin philosophers such as Walter Burley and William of Ockham instead of devoting themselves, as he himself had done, to Themistius, Simplicius, and other Greek commentators on Aristotle.[16] In his *Miscellanea* of 1489, Poliziano had lavished praise on Barbaro, "the fiercest enemy of barbarism," for cleansing and expanding the Latin philosophical vocabulary so that it almost rivaled that of the Greeks in splendor and richness.[17]

All these themes are apparent in the letter that Barbaro wrote to Pico on April 5, 1485, including a play on his surname, which was a running

[14] See the letters to an unknown correspondent in Barbaro, *Epistolae, orationes et carmina*, 2:22–3, especially 23: "Negabatur [latine scribi posse] sophisticas quisquilias et suisetica inania quae vulgo cavillationes vocantur; id nos vel commodissime tractari posse hoc quatriduo convicimus." See also Carlo Dionisotti, "Ermolao Barbaro e la fortuna di Suiseth," in *Medioevo e Rinascimento: Studi in onore di Bruno Nardi*, 2 vols. (Florence: Sansoni, 1955), 1:217–53; McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation*, 242–3; Bianchi, "Fra Ermolao Barbaro," 345–51.

[15] See his "Praefatio in Suetonii expositionem," in Angelo Poliziano, *Opera, quae quidem extitere hactenus, omnia* (Basel: Nicolaus Episcopius, 1553; repr., Turin: Bottega d'Erasmo, 1971), 499–506, at 502: "Libuit mihi aliquando excutere scrupulosius commentaria in Aristotelem nonnulla, quae isti [scholastici] inter prima adamant, ipsis etiam Getis barbariora. Deus bone, quae monstra in illis, quae portenta deprehendi? quam aut omnino nihil sentiunt, aut contra eum ipsum, quem interpretantur, ridicule sentiunt? Contuli et graecum Aristotelem cum Teutonico, hoc est, eloquentissimum cum infantissimo et elingui." See also Vittore Branca, *Poliziano e l'umanesimo della parola* (Turin: Einaudi, 1983); Anthony Grafton, "Angelo Poliziano and the Reorientation of Philology," in *Joseph Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983–93), 1:9–44; and E. Bigi's entry on Angelo Ambrogini in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, 2:691–702.

[16] "Praelectio in dialectica," in Poliziano, *Opera*, 528–30, at 529: "...si ex me quaeratis, qui mihi praeceptores in Peripateticorum fuerint scholis, strues vobis monstrare librarias potero, ubi Theophrastos, Alexandros, Themistios, Hammonios, Simplicios, Philoponos, aliosque ex Aristotelis familia numerabitis, quorum nunc in locum (si diis placent) Burleus [Walter Burley], Erveus [Herveus Natalis], Occan [Ockham],... Antisberus [Heytesbury], Strodusque [Ralph Strode] succedunt..."

[17] See chap. 90 of the *Miscellanea*, ibid., 301–3, at 301: "Hermolaus Barbarus, barbariae hostis acerrimus, qui latinae philosophiae velut arma instrumentumque verborum sic aut aure diligentissima terget, aut incude nova fabricatur, ut ob ipsius industriam iam nunc paene in isto quidem genere, vel nitore, vel copia vivamus ex pari cum Graecis."

joke between him and his friends[18] – he begins with an apology for not writing sooner, saying that this must have made him seem "utterly barbaric and ungrateful."[19] Then, combining transparently false modesty with shameless flattery, two key features of humanist correspondence, Barbaro claims that the only reason he appears to be anyone at all is because Pico has approved of his Themistius translation.[20] Continuing the paean to his young friend's "brilliant and quite divine talent," Barbaro writes that Pico is already, or will soon become, an "outstanding poet" and "most eminent orator," as well as being a "philosopher" conversant with both Aristotelianism and Platonism.[21]

Barbaro may have been in no doubt that Pico had the ability to distinguish himself in all three professions – poetry, oratory, and philosophy – but Pico himself was not so sure. A few years earlier he had written to Poliziano, declaring that he was undeserving of the compliments he had received on his poetry.[22] In fact, Pico was right to suspect that he did

[18] See, e.g., Poliziano's undated letter to him, in Angelo Poliziano, *Letters*, ed. and trans. Shane Butler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 1:32–5, at 34: "si Hermolai mihi dentur decem sub quibus meream, facile sperem literas, cum Graecas tum Latinas, e barbaria media receptum iri." I have corrected Butler's text.

[19] Barbaro, *Epistolae, orationes et carmina*, 1:84–7: "Non possum tibi non videri plane barbarus et ingratus. . . ." I have consulted the English translation of this letter in Quirinus Breen, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola on the Conflict of Philosophy and Rhetoric," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 13 (1952): 384–412, at 392–4. Barbaro recycled the joke twice, once in an undated letter to Poliziano (Poliziano, *Letters*, 1:44–7, at 46: "In magno versor periculo ne in tanto meritorum eius [sc. Lorenzo de' Medici] erga me cumulo et ingratus et barbarus esse videar") and again in a letter to Marsilio Ficino, dated August 1, 1490 (Barbaro, *Epistolae, orationes et carmina*, 2:58: "Ferus sim, nedum barbarus, qui nec muneri nec litteris tuis responderim. . . .").

[20] Barbaro, *Epistolae, orationes et carmina*, 1:84–5: ". . . ego alioquin modestus, immo timidus et parum mihi fidens, videor aliquid esse, quod tu me laudas, quod meas probas, quod in Themistio nostro, quemadmodum scribis, tanquam in iucundissimo diversorio saepe conquiescis." See two of Pico's previous letters to Barbaro, the first written ca. 1482 (Pico, *Opera*, 376: ". . . antea rerum omnium doctrinam tuam rumore tantum cognoveram, eam nunc his oculis, his auribus agnovi, dum Romanum Themistium tuo illo ore de ingenio animae, de primis rerum exordiis, de ratiocinandi scientia disertantem audivi. Deus bone quantum doctrinae? quae dictionum divitiae? quis candor? quae mundicies orationis?") and the second dated December 6, 1484 (ibid., 368: "De studiis meis ego quid ad te scribam nihil habeo, nisi assiduum me in Hermolao esse, mearumque noctium maximam partem in tuo Themistio vigilare"). Pico gave similar praise to Poliziano's 1479 translation of Epictetus's *Enchiridion* (Poliziano, *Letters*, 1:20–3).

[21] Barbaro, *Epistolae, orationes et carmina*, 1:85: "O praeclarum et plane divinum ingenium tuum, Pice . . . deo te poetam egregium, oratorem eminentissimum vel esse iam vel brevi fore. Animadverto te philosophum prius aristotelicum, nunc etiam platonicum esse factum."

[22] Pico, *Letters*, 1:26–31, at 26: "Quod proximis literis tuis me tantopere laudaris, debeo tibi tantum quantum ab eo absum ut merito lauder." Pico had sent some poems of his to Poliziano for criticism and improvement (ibid., 1:16–17, Book I, Letter III). Poliziano

not actually measure up to his friend's high standards, at least when it came to Latinity: in the process of editing Pico's letters for publication in his own *Libri epistolarum*, Poliziano often made improvements to the style.[23] Promising to try "to be one day the kind of person you proclaim I am already," Pico says that in the meantime he will imitate the strategy of Poliziano, "excusing yourself for your Greek by saying you are Latin, and for your Latin because you are trying to be Greek." In like fashion, Pico will make himself acceptable to poets and orators by claiming to be a philosopher and to philosophers by presenting himself as an orator and worshipper of the Muses. "Nonetheless, things have turned out far differently for me," he adds, "since, while I want to sit, as they say, in two seats, I am excluded from both, and the end result is, in short, that I am neither a poet and an orator, on the one hand, nor a philosopher, on the other."[24] While Barbaro, who saw himself as both a philosopher and a humanist and who firmly believed that philosophy and eloquence should not be kept apart, saw no problem in simultaneously pursuing the path of philosophy and that of rhetoric and poetry, Pico, in the early 1480s,[25] was already aware that the two roads lead in very different directions and that he might well have to choose between them.[26]

Barbaro, in the letter of 1485, reiterates his commitment to the importance of studying Greek texts in the original, encouraging Pico "to

replied, "Si verba suppeterent animo, laudare pro merito ingenium, literas, eloquentiam tuam conarer" (ibid., 1:25, Book I, Letter VI) and "quantum repeto memoria, nihil illis tersius, dulcius, ornatius" (ibid., 1:27, Book I, Letter VII).

[23] See "Introduction," Pico, *Letters*, 1:xi; see, e.g., 1:305 for Poliziano's alterations to Book I, Letter VIII.

[24] Ibid., 1:28–9: "Conabor quidem . . . talis esse aliquando qualem nunc me praedicas et esse aut iudicas aut certe velles. Interea imitabor te, Angele, qui te Graecis excusas quod sis Latinus, Latinis quod Graecisses. Simili et ego utar perfugio, ut poetis rhetoribus me approbem propterea quod philosophari dicar, philosophis quod rhetorissem et musas colam. Quanquam mihi longe aliter accidit atque tibi, quippe ego dum geminis sellis (ut aiunt) sedere volo, utraque excludor, fitque demum, ut dicam paucis, ut nec poeta nec rhetor sim, neque philosophus." Here and elsewhere I have modified Butler's translation.

[25] Bausi, whose monograph takes its title from this letter, notes that it was assigned to 1483 by Eugenio Garin (Bausi, *Nec rhetor*, 91–2 n. 130); however, in one fifteenth-century manuscript (Florence: Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. XC sup. 37), in the hand of Poliziano's student Jacopo Modesti da Prato, it is dated "Idibus Iul. 1481" (Poliziano, *Letters*, 1:295, 305).

[26] The philosopher Ficino, for instance, gave up any attempt to match the eloquence of his humanist friends; see his letter, dated September 13, 1488, to Barbaro, in Marsilio Ficino, *Opera omnia*, 2 vols. (Basel: Officina Henrici Petrina, 1576), 1:891: "Scriberem certe saepius si scriberem elegantius. Audio enim castigatissimis auribus tuis nisi exquisitissima non placere. Beatus es, amice, qui primus sis gradum eloquentiae consecutus. Neque tamen ego sum miser, nam decimo sum contentus."

become as thoroughly familiar with Greek" as he is with Latin, recognizing as he does that "for many centuries no Latin author has produced a monumental work without also knowing Greek."[27] As for the "Germans and Teutons," his derisive name for scholastic philosophers, Barbaro does not even consider them to be Latin authors. Echoing his condemnation of "commonplace, insignificant and wooden philosophers" who separate philosophy from eloquence,[28] he notes that these scholastics are generally held to be "coarse, crude and uncultivated barbarians" – the Latin term *barbari* signals the usual insider joke: Barbaro, a paragon of literary cultivation and sophistication, shares his name with these most uncouth writers. While admitting that they had said something useful and that they were not lacking in natural endowments or learning, he nevertheless insists that, in order to earn an immortal reputation, an author must possess a style that is "polished and elegant, or at least pure and chaste."[29]

Assuming that he and Pico were singing from the same hymn sheet, Barbaro was not prepared for the reaction that his attack on scholastic philosophers provoked.[30] Though claiming to agree with Barbaro, Pico in his reply came up with a forceful defense of the scholastics, arguing that the profound substance of their thought far outweighed the deficiencies of their style. The case is based on a radical distinction between rhetoric and philosophy, using a series of dichotomies and binary categories to portray the former as totally wrong and the latter as totally right.[31] The obvious exaggeration of this opposition makes it difficult to discern Pico's genuine intent, as does his use of elegant classical Latin, overflowing with learned allusions to ancient authors and studded with rhetorical figures, to defend scholastic philosophy and attack humanist rhetoric. This paradox has given ammunition to those scholars who maintain that the letter should be seen as a parody, a mock defense, in which the apparent thesis is undermined by the humor.[32] Yet while humor undoubtedly runs

[27] Barbaro, *Epistolae, orationes et carmina*, 1:85–6: "Hortarer te ad has litteras [sc. graecas], uti eas tam plane familiariter quam latinas teneres, sed non indiges calcaribus. . . . Unum te scio scire: nullius latina lingua tot saeculis extare monumenta, qui litteris graecis caruerit."

[28] See n. 10 above.

[29] Barbaro, *Epistolae, orationes et carmina*, 1:86: "Nec enim inter auctores latinae linguae Germanos istos et Teutonas . . . ; appellantur enim vulgo sordidi, rudes, inculti barbari. . . . At enim utile aliquid dixerunt, valuere ingenio, doctrina, bonarum rerum copia. . . . [S]ed sermo nitidus et elegans, saltem purus et castus. . . ."

[30] See his first reply to Pico (ibid., 100–1, at 100): "At tu, Minerva, fellem quid provocas?"

[31] See Vickers on the widespread use of this tactic in anti-rhetorical treatises ("Territorial Disputes," 249–58).

[32] See, e.g., Panizza, "Pico della Mirandola e il *De genere dicendi philosophorum*" and "Pico della Mirandola's 1485 Parody" and also Vickers, *In Defence*, 184–9.

throughout the letter and certainly complicates interpretation, it does not in the end subvert the serious points that Pico makes not only here but elsewhere in his works.

He opens his reply, conventionally enough, by flattering his correspondent, expressing the wish that he had both the mental capacity to grasp Barbaro's merits and the verbal ability to express them. But just as words are not equal to the mind, so the mind falls short of reality.[33] It is significant for the overall position adopted by Pico in the letter that in this three-tiered hierarchy – with reality on the top, the mind in the middle, and words on the bottom – thought comes closer to reality than speech. He continues by praising Barbaro's style, which is learned, serious, well ordered, accomplished, vigorous, and clever. It enables him to be spectacularly persuasive and to compel his reader's mind to go wherever he wants.[34] Here we are introduced to one of the central themes of the letter: the power of carefully wrought words to induce persuasion.

Pico then mentions Barbaro's most recent letter, "in which you lay into those barbarian philosophers, who, you say, are generally held to be coarse, crude and uncultivated."[35] He claims that, after reading Barbaro's letter, he is ashamed and annoyed at having spent six years on those barbarians, wasting "the best years" of his life – he was twenty-two at the time – burning the midnight oil on Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, Albertus Magnus, and Averroës, precious time that could have been spent pursuing a humanist curriculum of classical Greek and Latin literature.[36]

[33] See the text of the letter, with facing Italian translation and detailed commentary, in Barbaro and Pico, *Filosofia*, 36–65, 99–129, at 36: ". . . utinam esset is meae mentis captus, ut pro meritis tuis de te sentirem; utinam ea dicendi vis, ut exprimere aliquando possem quod semper sentio. . . . [T]am deesse scias animo verba quam rebus animus deest." I have sometimes slightly altered Bausi's text. I have consulted the English translations of this letter in Breen, "Giovanni Pico," 394–402, and *Renaissance Debates on Rhetoric*, ed. and trans. Wayne Rebhorn (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 58–67. See also the French version in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oeuvres philosophiques*, ed. and trans. Olivier Boulnois and Giuseppe Tognon (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), 255–66, and the Italian in *Prosatori latini del Quattrocento*, ed. Eugenio Garin (Milan and Naples: Ricciardi, 1952), 804–23.

[34] Barbaro and Pico, *Filosofia*, 36, 38: "Ipse . . . stilus tuus . . . est doctus, gravis, compositus, eruditus, excussus, ingeniosus. . . . Sed mirum dictu quam persuadeas et legentis animum quocumque velis impellas."

[35] Ibid., 38: ". . . hac tua ad me epistola, in qua, dum barbaros hos philosophos insectaris, quos dicis haberi vulgo sordidos, rudes, incultos. . . ."

[36] Ibid.: ". . . ita me puduit piguitque studiorum meorum (iam enim sexennium apud illos versor) ut nihil minus me fecisse velim, quam in tam nihili facienda re tam laboriose contendisse. Perdiderim ego, inquam, apud Thomam, Ioannem Scotum, apud Albertum, apud Averroem meliores annos, tantas vigilias, quibus potuerim in bonis litteris fortasse

In an attempt to console himself, Pico imagines how a medieval scholastic philosopher, if he were brought back to life, might defend his case, given that these men were "capable of coming up with many arguments." The particular scholastic whom Pico conjures up from his imagination is "a bit more eloquent" than the rest, so that he can defend "his barbarousness as unbarbarically as possible."[37]

The main theme of the speech delivered by this fictional scholastic philosopher, which takes up the body of the letter, is the difference between the dubious profession of orators, who seek to produce persuasive speeches by means of superficial elegance and eloquence, and the noble calling of philosophers, who attempt to establish profound truths by means of rational argument. Speaking through an invented character, however, is a standard rhetorical device, known as "prosopopoeia," so we are immediately put on guard that the philosopher's remorseless condemnation of rhetoric cannot necessarily be taken at face value.

The scholastic begins by countering Barbaro's assertion that a glittering style is the only way to secure an enduring reputation. On the contrary, he claims, he and his like have achieved fame and will continue to be famous, not in schools for young boys run by grammarians, but rather among philosophers and wise men, who have no time for pedantic disputes about who Andromache's mother was, how many children Niobe had, and other such trivia. These are examples of "vexed questions" that go back to the grammarians of antiquity and are mentioned, for instance, by Aulus Gellius and Seneca. Philosophers, says the scholastic, are concerned instead with important issues relating to "human and divine matters," a phrase lifted from Cicero's definition of the subject matter of philosophy.[38] The paradoxical tone of the speech is confirmed by the scholastic philosopher's reliance, here and throughout, on classical

nonnihil esse!" For Pico's studies of scholastic philosophy, see Eugenio Garin, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Vita e dottrina* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1937), 10–14, and Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Pico," in *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1964), 54–71, at 56.

[37] Barbaro and Pico, *Filosofia*, 38: "Cogitabam mecum, ut me consolarer, si qui ex illis nunc reviviscant, habiturine quicquam sint quo suam causam, argumentosi alioqui homines, ratione aliqua tueantur. Demum succurrit ex ipsis quempiam paulo facundiorem suam barbariem, quam poterit minime barbare, hunc in modum fortasse defensurum."

[38] Ibid., 38–9: "Viximus celebres, o Hermolae, et posthac vivemus, non in scholis grammaticorum et paedagogiis, sed in philosophorum coronis, in conventibus sapientum, ubi non de matre Andromache, non de Niobes filiis atque id genus levibus nugis, sed de humanarum divinarumque rationibus agitur et disputatur." See Aulus Gellius *Attic Nights* XX.7; Seneca *Letter* LXXXVIII; and Cicero *Tusculan Disputations* I.5 and *De oratore* I.212.

sources closely associated with the very humanists whose scholarship he derides.

Congratulating himself and his fellow barbarians on their subtlety, their mental sharpness, and their penetrating intellects, all of which enable them to engage in a disinterested pursuit of the truth, he notes that, while they may lack eloquence, they are not wanting in wisdom, for they have Mercury in their hearts, not on their tongues.[39] The scholastic returns to this metaphor later in the speech, when he finds fault with people who divorce the heart from the tongue and, even worse, those who, according to Cato, are all tongue and no heart, since they are nothing but dictionaries of the dead.[40] The first idea is a straightforward borrowing from Cicero,[41] while the reference to Cato is found in Aulus Gellius, where, exactly opposite to its use here, it is directed against a philosopher by a rhetorician.[42] The scholastic therefore turns the original anecdote on its head when he concludes, "We can live, though perhaps not comfortably, without a tongue; but we cannot live at all without a heart. A person unfamiliar with refined learning is not a cultured human being; a person ignorant of philosophy is not a human being."[43] The scholastic is not merely adept at locating apposite classical references to reinforce his argument, he is also skilled in twisting their meaning to his own advantage.

Yet this is precisely what he accuses orators of doing. It is their job, he says, to be able, at will, to transform black into white and white into black. The orator's task is to present things in such a way that they no longer seem to be what their own inner nature makes them but rather whatever the orator has made them into. "All this is nothing but sheer mendacity, sheer charlatanry, sheer deceit."[44] The philosopher's entire

[39] Barbaro and Pico, *Filosofia*, 40: ". . . experietur habuisse barbaros non in lingua sed in pectore Mercurium, non defuisse illis sapientiam, si defuit eloquentia. . . ."

[40] Ibid., 58: "Peccant qui dissidium cordis et linguae faciunt; sed qui excordes, toti sunt lingua, nonne sunt mera, ut Cato ait, mortuaria glossaria?" See also p. 50: ". . . laudabile in nobis habere Musas in animo et non in labris."

[41] Cicero *De oratore* III.61.

[42] Aulus Gellius *Attic Nights* XVIII.7. The passage is used according to its original meaning in Petrarch, *Rerum memorandarum libri*, ed. Giuseppe Billanovich (Florence: Sansoni, 1943), 139–40 (III.47). See Bausi, *Nec rhetor*, 33–4.

[43] Barbaro and Pico, *Filosofia*, 60: "Vivere sine lingua possumus, forte non commode; sed sine corde nullo modo possumus. Non est humanus qui sit insolens politioris literaturae; non est homo qui sit expers philosophiae."

[44] Ibid., 40: "Est . . . vestrum [officium] posse pro arbitrio, in candida nigrum vertere, in nigra candidum; . . . demum res ipsas magicis quasi . . . viribus eloquentiae in quam libuerit faciem habitumque transformare, ut non qualia sunt suopte ingenio, sed qualia volueritis. . . . Hoc totum estne quicquam aliud quam merum mendacium, mera impostura, merum praestigium . . . ?"

endeavor, by contrast, is to discover the truth and to demonstrate it to others. Arguing against the firmly held conviction of Barbaro and most fifteenth-century humanists that philosophy should be joined to rhetoric, bringing together wisdom and eloquence,[45] the scholastic maintains that if philosophers were to indulge in verbal niceties, it would appear that they were attempting to seduce listeners with the sumptuousness and beauty of their speech rather than basing themselves on reality.[46]

When investigation of the truth is at stake, he insists, nothing is more inappropriate and harmful than ornate speech. It is for this reason that the Bible eschews elegance.[47] Eloquence and rhetoric are suitable for the law courts and for politicians, where the aim is to persuade the public. They have no place in the university, where the purpose is to study natural and celestial phenomena.[48] Again and again in the speech, the scholastic is at pains to associate rhetoric with persuading the easily swayed crowd and philosophy with convincing the discerning minority. Philosophers do not want the applause of the theater; instead, they want the respectful silence of those few who look more deeply into matters. So what, he tells Barbaro, if the common herd consider us to be coarse, crude, and uncultivated, as you claim: it is not for them that we write but for you and those like you.[49]

While this attitude on the part of the scholastic may reflect the aristocratic disdain of the Count of Mirandola and Concordia for the masses, what is put forward here is not a social but an intellectual elitism, very

[45] Ibid.: "Tanta est inter oratoris munus et philosophi pugnantia, ut pugnare magis invicem non possint." For Barbaro's opposing view see n. 10 above; for that of fifteenth-century humanists, see Jerrold E. Seigel, *Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism: The Union of Eloquence and Wisdom, Petrarch to Valla* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968).

[46] Barbaro and Pico, *Filosofia*, 42: "Adde quod nobis nulla erit fides lautitias vocum et veneres affectantibus, quasi, rebus parum fidentes, nec vero nixi, trahere in sententiam his lenociniis homines quaeramus."

[47] Ibid.: "Est ob hanc causam legere res sacras rustice potius quam eleganter scriptas, quod nihil sit magis dedecens et noxium in omni materia in qua de vero cognoscendo agitur quam universum istud dicendi genus elaboratum." See also p. 52: "Non movent, non persuadent [sacrae litterae], sed cogunt, agitant, vim inferunt Legis rudia verba et agrestia, sed viva, sed animata, flammea, aculeata. . . ."

[48] Ibid., 42: "Hoc forensium est quaestionum, non naturalium atque caelestium; non est eorum qui in Academia, sed qui in republica illa versantur, in qua quae fiunt quaeque dicuntur populari trutina examinantur. . . ."

[49] Ibid., 46, 48: "Non expectamus theatri plausum . . . ; sed expectamus paucorum potius prae admiratione silentium, introspicientium penitus aliquid aut de naturae adytis erutum, aut de caelestium, de Iovis aula ad homines adductum. . . . Quodsi vulgo, ut dicis, habemur sordidi, rudes, inculti. . . . Vulgo non scripsimus, sed tibi et tui similibus."

similar to that of Pico's friend Poliziano, who came from a relatively humble background.[50] Anticipating complaints about his *Miscellanea*, an immensely learned collection of one hundred short essays, in which he drew on his unrivaled knowledge of ancient literature to resolve intricate textual problems, Poliziano stated in the preface that "in this genre of writings, which do not market themselves to the multitude but rather are aimed solely at the few, the modest use of recherché trappings by no means earns disapproval from those of sound judgement."[51] When the expected criticism duly arrived, Marco Lucido Fazini, known as "Lucidus Phosphorus," consoled his friend with the thought that "Poliziano is for the few, that is, for the most learned, not for a crowd of literary amateurs, schoolteachers, and members of the general public."[52] It is worth noting that Fazini was as disdainful of schoolteachers as the fictional scholastic philosopher – a prejudice shared by Pico, as we shall see.[53]

Another theme in the scholastic's speech is the contrast between the outer surface, the province of the orator, and the inner core, the realm of the philosopher. Rhetoric is repeatedly associated with artificial attempts to glamorize a person's external appearance by means of makeup, white face paint, and curling irons (the Latin term *calamistrum* also means excessively ornamented discourse).[54] Attracted by a colored complexion, the reader goes only skin deep, never penetrating to the marrow and blood, which are often diseased under the painted face. Writers frequently deploy varied rhythms and harmonies to detain readers at the surface because everything inside is empty and meaningless.[55]

[50] Poliziano, in a letter to Jacopo Antiquari, dated December 29, 1489, referring to Pico and to the Venetian patricians Barbaro and Girolamo Donato, writes, "... ego tam me scio cum talibus nec ingenio nec doctrina, qui nec natalibus nec fortuna debere conferri" (*Letters*, 1:212–15, at 214).

[51] Poliziano, *Opera*, 213–17, at 214: "... in hoc genus scriptionibus, quae non se populo venditant sed paucis modo parantur, usus istiusmodi reconditae supellectilis, praesertim verecundus, minime improbatur a bonis." See also McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation*, 197.

[52] Poliziano, *Letters*, 1:180–3, at 180–1: "Politianus paucorum, id est doctissimorum est, non turbae literatulorum ac paedagogorum et vulgi." See the article on Fazini by F. Pignatti in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, 45:496–8.

[53] See n. 38 above and n. 94 below.

[54] Barbaro and Pico, *Filosofia*: "Quis ... cincinnos, quis fucum in proba virgine non damnet" (40); "Non ergo nos, sed illi inepti, qui ... gravitatem philosophicarum rerum et castitatem ... calamistris dehonestent" (42); "... a fucato sermone quid sperat aliud quam insidias?" (52); "Nonne vulgatum bonas formas cerussa devenustari?" (54).

[55] Ibid., 44: "... cavendum nobis, ne illectus cute medicata lector demoretur ad eam, ad medullam et sanguinem non pervadat, quem subesse saepe cerussato ori infectum

One writer who adopted this practice, according to Pico in a letter to Lorenzo de' Medici, was Petrarch. Until recently, this letter was believed to have been written on July 15, 1484, predating the one to Barbaro by just under a year; however, it has now been convincingly assigned to July 15, 1486, a little more than a year after his correspondence with Barbaro.[56] In the letter, Pico judges Lorenzo's Italian poetry to be superior to that of Dante and Petrarch. Like the authors condemned by the scholastic for their reliance on rhetoric, Petrarch writes sweet-smelling, florid, and ornamented verses which are nevertheless so empty that, penetrating beneath their sonorous melody, one appears to be staring into the Epicurean void.[57] Like the barbaric philosophers defended by the scholastic, Dante's poems are profound in content, but his style is "rough, harsh and spare."[58] Employing a variation on the distinction between external surface and inner essence used by the scholastic to characterize orators and philosophers, Pico says that Petrarch attracts at first glance but disappoints when one looks further into him, while Dante is off-putting to begin with but repays deeper inspection.[59] Lorenzo, of course, wins the laurel because his poems are written in an elegant poetic style, though without recourse to artificial embellishments,[60] and also have serious

vidimus. Vidimus, inquam, in hisce omnibus quibus propterea in usu venit, cum nihil sit intus non inane et vanum, detinere lectorem in prima facie modulatu vario atque concentu. . . ."

[56] Francesco Bausi argues convincingly that Pico's nephew Gianfrancesco altered the date in order to place his uncle's interest in *volgare* love poetry at an earlier stage in his intellectual and spiritual development. "L'epistola di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola a Lorenzo de' Medici: Testo, traduzione e commento," *Interpres* 17 (1998): 7–57, at 7–21.

[57] Ibid., 24, 26: "Cum . . . illam suam verborum ostentat supellectilem, sua unguenta, cincinnos et flores, admoneret saepe, si adesset, Castritius . . . ne falleremur rotundato sono et versuum cursu, sed inspiceremus quid nam subesset, quae sedes, quod firmamentum, quis fundus verbis. Quod si facias, dii boni, ut illic videas Epicuri quandoque vacuum, ita aut nullum subesse sensum, aut frigidum et levem." For Titus Castricius, see Aulus Gellius *Attic Nights* XI.13.4–10.

[58] Ibid., 26: ". . . quod ad stilum spectat . . . ita est Dantes nonnunquam horridus, asper et strigosus, ut multum rudis et impolitus. . . . Si de Deo, de anima, de beatis agitur, affert quae Thomas, quae Augustinus de his scripserunt; et fuit ille in his tractandis meditandisque tam frequens quam assiduus. . . ."

[59] Ibid., 28: ". . . addiderim, Franciscum quandoque non respondere pollicitis, habentem quod allectet in prima specie, sed ulterius non satisfaciat; Dantem habere quod in occursu quandoque offendat, sed iuvet magis intima pervadentem."

[60] Ibid., 24: ". . . illae acres, subtiles et (ut uno dixerim verbo) Laurentianae sententiae, vix dici potest ut calamistros respuant et istos fucos non libenter admittant. . . ." See also Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola's account of his uncle's views on this subject, in his *Ioannis Pici Mirandulani . . . vita*, ed. and trans. Tommaso Sorbelli (Modena: Aedes Muratoriana, 1962), 42: "Pauli epistolas oratorum omnium scriptionibus eloquentia prestare dicebat,

philosophical content.[61] The letter leaves us in no doubt, however, that in Pico's scale of values, weighty subject matter rates much higher than eloquent exposition.[62]

In Pico's letter to Barbaro, the scholastic uses another image to illustrate the disparity between external appearance and internal reality: the statues of Silenus, ugly on the outside but filled with precious gems on the inside, which Alcibiades in Plato's *Symposium* – a source not available to medieval philosophers – compares to Socrates, whose unprepossessing appearance concealed a lofty soul.[63] Combining this notion with his unashamed elitism, the scholastic explains that the reason philosophers choose to hide the interior beauty of their thoughts under the ugly exterior of a rough style is to prevent the public from gaining access to ideas unsuited to their limited understanding.[64]

Pico later applied the same concept to the Bible. In 1489 he completed the *Heptaplus, or Sevenfold Narration of the Six Days of Creation*, in which he interpreted the first verses of Genesis. He explains, in the first proem, that many people despise this book of Moses as mediocre and trivial because they judge it on the basis of the rough bark of its words and cannot believe that there is anything more divine in its depths than what appears on the surface.[65] If, however, we regard the writings of Moses as

Tullii etiam ipsius Demosthenisque primarii . . . dicendi artificis lucubrationes nominatim citans, non quod essent, ut illae, calamistris inustae et corrasis undique fucis et cincinnis constipatae, sed ut veram et solidam et redolerent et saperent eloquentiam. . . ." (cited and discussed by Bausi, *Nec rhetor*, 190–2).

[61] Bausi, "L'epistola di Giovanni Pico," 22: "Sunt apud vos duo praecipue celebrati poetae Florentinae linguae, Franciscus Petrarcha et Dantes Aligerius, de quibus illud in universum sim praefatus, esse ex eruditis qui res in Francisco, verba in Dante desiderent. In te qui mentem habeat et aures neutrum desideraturum, in quo non sit videre an res oratione, an verba sententiis magis illustrentur."

[62] Bausi refers to "la decisa proclamazione . . . della superiorità del rude ma profundo Dante sul raffinato ma vacuo Petrarca" (ibid., 18).

[63] Barbaro and Pico, *Filosofia*, 48: "Sed vis effingam ideam sermonis nostri? Ea est ipsissima quae Silenorum nostri Alcibiadis. Erant enim horum simulacra hispido ore, taetro et aspernabili, sed intus plena gemmarum, supellectilis rarae et pretiosae." See Plato *Symposium* 215B–17A; this passage is referred to again (ibid., 52).

[64] Ibid., 48: "Simile philosophorum studium, celare res suas populum, a quo . . . non probari modo, sed nec intelligi illos [decet]. . . ."

[65] Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno e scritti vari*, ed. Eugenio Garin (Florence: Vallecchi, 1942), 168–85, at 176: ". . . sunt multi qui Moseos librum, ducto argumento de rudi cortice verborum, tamquam aliquid de medio et triviale contemnant et aspernentur, nihilque apud eos minus credibile quam habere illum in recessu divinius aliquid quam quod fronte promittat." I have consulted the English translation of Douglas Carmichael, in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of*

hackneyed because at first view they are commonplace and crude, we may as well condemn ancient philosophers such as Plato, who in like manner concealed his teachings beneath the wrapping of riddles, the veil of fables, mathematical symbols, and obscure signs.[66] Jesus, moreover, proclaimed his Gospel to the crowds in parables, speaking openly and without figures only to those few disciples capable of comprehending the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, and not revealing everything even to them.[67] Pico had also used this idea and its attendant metaphors to interpret the *Guide for the Perplexed* in his *900 Theses* of 1486, arguing that while Maimonides "in the superficial bark of words appears to move with the philosophers, in the hidden insights of profound meaning he embraces the mysteries of the Kabbalah."[68]

Pico's scholastic is prepared to admit that he and his fellow medieval philosophers are guilty of transgressing the rules of classical Latinity – using *causari*, for instance, instead of *produci* – but he denies that this makes their terminology incorrect.[69] If language is a matter of convention, there is no reason that one set of agreed linguistic norms is correct and another incorrect. Scholastic philosophers did not write in the Roman manner? Fine, call it instead the French, British, Spanish, or even,

Man, On Being and the One, Heptaplus (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 67–75. See Crofton Black, *Pico's* Heptaplus *and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006).

[66] Pico, *De hominis dignitate*, 172, 174: "Plato noster . . . involucris aenigmatum, fabularum velamine, mathematicis imaginibus et subobscuris recedentium sensuum indiciis, sua dogmata occultavit. . . . Quare, si ob id Moseos lectionem velut exculcatum putamus, quod nihil habeat in primori fronte non vulgare, non rudis, damnemus eodem exemplo antiquos omnes philosophos ruditatis et ignorantiae. . . ."

[67] Ibid., 174: "Iesus Christus . . . Evangelium . . . praedicavit . . . turbis quidem in parabolis, seorsum autem paucis discipulis quibus datum erat nosse mysteria regni caelorum palam citraque figuras; neque omnia paucis illis. . . ."

[68] See the sixty-third of Pico's "Conclusiones cabalisticae LXXI secundum opinionem propriam," in S. A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486): The Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems* (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998), 546–7: "Sicut Aristoteles diviniorem philosophiam, quam philosophi antiqui sub fabulis et apologis velarunt, ipse sub philosophicae speculationis facie dissimulavit et verborum brevitate obscuravit, ita Rabi Moyses Aegyptius, in libro qui a Latinis dicitur Dux neutrorum, dum per superficialem verborum corticem videtur cum philosophis ambulare, per latentes profundi sensus intelligentias, mysteria complectitur Cabalae." Here and elsewhere I have modified Farmer's translation.

[69] Barbaro and Pico, *Filosofia*, 56: "Si dicendo incurrat, exempli causa, a sole hominem 'produci,' 'causari' hominem nostrates dicent. Clamabis actutum: 'hoc non est Latinum,' hucusque vere; 'non est Romane dictum,' hoc vero verius; 'igitur non recte,' peccat argumentum."

as it is commonly known, the Parisian style.[70] They were too busy trying to discover what agreed or disagreed with nature to worry about what agreed or disagreed with the Roman language.[71]

Barbaro, as we have seen, was concerned to demonstrate that it was possible to write about natural philosophy without violating the "propriety and lucidity of the Roman language."[72] Pico, when writing to his humanist friend Poliziano, begged him to "work hard" and "rescue literature from its decay, so that the brilliance of the Roman language may not grow entirely dim through the harmful effects of time."[73] When setting out his *900 Theses* for the planned disputation in Rome, however, he announced in the preface that he had "not imitated the splendor of the Roman language, but instead the style in which the most celebrated Parisian disputants speak, since it is used by almost all philosophers of our day."[74] Adopting the Parisian style mentioned by his scholastic for the theses was a pragmatic decision based on its centuries-long status as the lingua franca of philosophers. Adopting the same style in the *Apology*, however, was a deliberate act of provocation, directed against the theologians of the papal commission who had judged thirteen of his theses to be heretical or of dubious orthodoxy. At the conclusion of the first section of the introduction, taken over wholesale from his undelivered *Oration*, which was written in a decidedly rhetorical and humanist manner, Pico says that he is going to alter his style in order to discuss the controversial theses, for he "now has to speak with barbarians and, as the proverb neatly puts it, stammerers only understand other stammerers."[75] He repeats the insult when defending the condemned thesis on magic

[70] Ibid.: ". . . quod si dignari illam Romani nominis appellatione non vultis, Gallicam vocetis, Britannicam, Hispanam, vel (quod vulgares dicere solent) Parisiensem."

[71] Ibid., 58: ". . . non poterant . . . Romanae linguae proprietates, leges, observantias adnotare. Quaerebant quid abhorrens, quid receptum in natura, quid a Romanis interea non curabant."

[72] See n. 12 above.

[73] Poliziano, *Letters*, 1:30–1: "Incumbe, quaeso, et literas quantum potes a situ recipe, ne nitor ille Romanae linguae iniuria temporum penitus obsolescat."

[74] Farmer, *Syncretism*, 210–11: "Iohannes Picus Mirandulanus . . . non Romanae linguae nitorem, sed celebratissimorum Parisiensium disputatorum dicendi genus est imitatus, propterea quod eo nostri temporis philosophi plerique omnes utuntur."

[75] See the introduction to the *Apologia*, in Pico, *Opera*, 114–25, at 125: "Sed iam ad ipsas examinandas quaestiones descendamus, quas magistri isti quasi haereticas damnarunt; quod facturo mutanda est loquendi ratio: est enim mihi cum barbaris sermo, et (ut lepide est in proverbio) balbi non nisi balbos intelligunt." The proverb had been used by Barbaro in one of the prefaces to his Themistius translation: see Barbaro, *Epistolae, orationes et carmina*, 1:10: ". . . quod non contingeret, nisi quod, ut in proverbio est, balbi balbos intelligunt." See Bausi, *Nec rhetor*, 165–6.

and Kabbalah.[76] Fearing that the papal theologians may not have understood what he wrote on Kabbalah in the first part of the introduction, any more than matters written about barbarically are understood by the learned, he says that he will now change to the Parisian style to discuss the subject.[77]

Barbaro might well wonder, Pico's scholastic concedes, why philosophers had to invent this language of their own rather than using the Latin tongue that was their birthright.[78] Pico himself answered the question in the preface to his *De ente et uno* of 1491. Since this treatise dealt with complex issues of Aristotelian and Platonic metaphysics, Pico sought indulgence from Poliziano, to whom he dedicated the work, for employing a technical vocabulary "that was not yet perhaps fully at home in Latin" but was needed in order to express new concepts. Warning Poliziano not to look for the meretricious embellishment of an elegant style, Pico cites a verse from Manilius's didactic poem on astronomy: "the subject matter itself does not permit adornment and is satisfied merely to be taught."[79] Poliziano had used the same quotation from Manilius a year earlier in his *Panepistemon*, the academic prolusion to his 1490–1 course at the Florentine Studio on Aristotle's *Ethics*, in order to make the same point: when attending lectures on philosophy, students should not expect oratorical fireworks or verbal ornaments and graphic language.[80] Nor was the situation different for philology. Responding to those who had complained about "linguistic monstrosities" in his *Miscellanea*, acknowledging that he was erudite but denying that he was eloquent, Poliziano asked, "What, indeed, would have been the point of eloquence in this work, put

[76] Farmer, *Syncretism*, 496: "Nulla est scientia quae nos magis certificet de divinitate Christi quam magia et Cabala."

[77] Pico, *Opera*, 175: "Volo . . . aliquid dicere latius de ista Cabala, quanquam et supra in prima parte Apologiae nostrae multa dixerimus; sed illa forte non magis ab istis magistris intelligentur quam intelligantur barbara ab eruditis: quare et hic aliquid secus [ed. "secum"; emended by Bausi, *Nec rhetor*, 166 n. 3], hoc Parisiensi stylo dicemus de ista Cabala."

[78] Barbaro and Pico, *Filosofia*, 58: "Sed quid oportuit novare eos linguam et, si nati erant inter Latinos, non Latine loqui?"

[79] See the "Prooemium" to *De ente et uno*, in Pico, *De hominis dignitate*, 386–9, at 388: "Licet . . . mihi per te, linguae politioris vindicem, verbis uti quibusdam nondum fortasse Latii iure donatis. Quae tamen ipsa rerum novitas et quaedam prope necessitas expressit, nec elegantioris stili lenocinium quaeras. Ut enim Manilius inquit, 'ornari res ipsa negat, contenta doceri.'" See Manilius *Astronomicon* III.39. I have consulted the translation of Paul J. Miller, in Pico, *On the Dignity of Man*, 37–8.

[80] See the *Panepistemon*, in Poliziano, *Opera*, 462–73, at 462: "Nec pompam . . . hic orationis aut verborum phaleras expectetis, et pictae tectoria linguae. Nam quod eleganter Manilius inquit astronomus: 'Ornari res ipsa negat, contenta doceri.'" See McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation*, 237.

together not to persuade but to teach?"[81] In agreement with the scholastic, who told Barbaro that rhetoric had no place in the university,[82] both Pico and Poliziano regarded a highly worked style as unsuitable when the aim was instruction, not persuasion.[83]

The scholastic finds endorsement for his belief that rhetoric is not needed in philosophical discourse from no less an authority than Cicero, who, he says, does not call for eloquence in a philosopher but merely requires that he has adequate knowledge and learning.[84] He is referring to a passage in *De finibus* where Cicero states that "if a philosopher has eloquence, I do not spurn it; if he does not have it, I do not greatly insist on it."[85] Pico alluded to the same passage in a letter of 1489, in response to a Franciscan professor from Siena who had sent him a treatise dealing with a problem in scholastic physics, prefaced by an apology for his imperfect Latin. "There is no need to make excuses to me for the fact that your style is not terribly learned," wrote Pico. "If a philosopher is eloquent, I am pleased; if he is not, I do not mind. A philosopher has one duty and aim: to unlock the truth. Whether you do so with a wooden or a golden key is of no concern to me; it is altogether preferable to unlock it with a wooden key than lock it with a golden one."[86]

[81] Letter to Marco Lucido Fazini, dated March 28, 1491, in Poliziano, *Letters*, 1:182–7, at 182 and 183: "Irasceris obtrectatoribus nostris . . . quod in Miscellaneis portenta me loqui verborum dicant, et ut hominem [ed. "hominum"] . . . doctum fateantur, ita negent eloquentem. . . . Quo enim eloquentia mihi in hoc opere, non ad persuadendum, sed ad docendum parato?"

[82] See n. 48 above.

[83] Barbaro, who did not share their view, criticized the scholastics for striving solely to teach, while ignoring persuasion; see his letter to Pico, dated September 4, 1489, congratulating him on the *Heptaplus*, in Barbaro, *Epistolae, orationes et carmina*, 2:50–1, at 51: "Tria me in eo mirifice delectant. Primum quod oratio tua docet et movet, id quod et in sacris litteris veteres theologos et in philosophia etiam naturali Pythagoricos observasse constat, recentioribus in docendo tantum sudantibus. . . ."

[84] Barbaro and Pico, *Filosofia*, 50: "Non desiderat Tullius eloquentiam in philosopho, sed ut rebus et doctrina satisfaciat."

[85] Cicero *De finibus* I.15: ". . . ego a philosopho, si afferat eloquentiam, non asperner, si non habeat, non admodum flagitem."

[86] See his letter to Galgano da Siena, in Armando F. Verde, *Lo studio fiorentino 1473–1503: Ricerche e documenti*, 4 vols. (Florence: Olschki, 1973–85), vol. IV.2, 988: "Dictionem minus eruditam apud me non est quod excuses qui eloquentiam in phylosopho, si adsit, probo, si desit, non desidero. Unum enim munus propositumque phylosophi est: aperire veritatem. Illa, modo aperiatur, sive ligneam admoveas clavem, sive auream, haud multum curo; praestat omnino aperire lignea quam aurea occludere." The treatise, *Quaestio de genere soni*, is published in the same work (vol. IV.2, 988–1016); see also Verde's introduction (985–7).

Another case where the scholastic certainly speaks for Pico is his comparison of Lucretius and Duns Scotus. He first dismisses the Epicurean poet's injunction to smear honey on the rim of a glass containing bitter-tasting medicinal wormwood – in other words, to make unpalatable arguments acceptable by phrasing them in sweet-sounding words – as a tactic suited for children or for the common crowd and one that is especially necessary for Lucretius's own writings, since they contain not only wormwood but poison.[87] The nature of that poison is spelled out in the peroration of the scholastic's speech, when he lists the doctrines expounded by Lucretius in elegant Latin: that everything is composed of atoms and the void, that God is corporeal and ignorant of our affairs, and that all things were generated by chance through the random collision of corpuscles. The medieval scholastic Duns Scotus, by contrast, speaks in a tasteless and crude manner and does not use proper Latin words, but he says that nature is constituted by matter and form, that God is a separate mind, and that he knows and has concern for all things. It is beyond dispute that Scotus surpasses Lucretius as a philosopher as much as Lucretius surpasses Scotus as a writer.[88] Returning to a metaphor that he has used to powerful effect earlier in the speech,[89] the scholastic says that Scotus has a foolish mouth, Lucretius a foolish mind, for the former does not know the decrees of the grammarians, much less those of the poets, but the latter does not know the decrees of God and nature.[90] Pico, who believed that the "truth is sought by philosophy, found by theology and

[87] Barbaro and Pico, *Filosofia*, 50: "At instabit Lucretius, etsi non egeant per se philosophiae commentationes amoenitate dicendi, per eius tamen adhibitionem dissimulandam esse ipsarum rerum austeritatem, sicut absinthia per se pellunt morbos, melle tamen illiniuntur, ut puerorum aetas improvida ludificetur. Hoc forte tibi faciendum erat, o Lucreti, si pueris scribebas tua, si vulgo; faciendum utique tibi, qui non absinthia modo, sed meracissima toxica propinares." See Lucretius *De rerum natura* I.936–50; for the influence of this metaphor on Italian literature of the Renaissance, see Valentina Prosperi, *"Di soavi licor gli orli del vaso": La fortuna di Lucrezio dall'umanesimo alla Controriforma* (Turin: Nino Aragno, 2004).

[88] Barbaro and Pico, *Filosofia*, 60, 62: "Dicet Lucretius rerum principia atomos et vacuum, Deum corporeum, rerum nostrarum inscium, temere omnia fortuito occursu corpusculorum ferri; sed haec Latine dicet et eleganter. Dicet Iohannes quae natura constant sua materia specieque constitui, esse Deum separatam mentem, cognoscentem omnia, omnibus consulentem. . . . At dicet insulse, ruditer, non Latinis verbis. . . . Extra omnem est controversiam tam rectius Scotum philosophari quam ille loquitur ornatius."

[89] See nn. 39, 40, and 43 above.

[90] Barbaro and Pico, *Filosofia*, 62: "Sed vide quid differant: huic os insipidum, illi mens desipiens. Hic grammaticorum, ne poetarum dicam, decreta nescit; ille Dei atque naturae."

possessed by religion,"[91] surely preferred the inarticulate Scotus, who understands things that cannot be praised sufficiently in words, to the eloquent Lucretius, who expresses what should not be said.[92]

The scholastic's speech now concluded, Pico tells Barbaro that he does not entirely agree with it. In fact, he confesses, it was partly a rhetorical exercise, to see whether he was able to praise the unpraiseworthy, like those who wrote mock encomia of subjects such as quartan fever, and partly a ploy to provoke Barbaro into defending eloquence, just as Glaucon praised injustice in order to goad Socrates into praising justice.[93] If he actually thought the scholastics were right to neglect eloquence or regard it as an inferior discipline, he would not have almost completely deserted them, as he has recently done, devoting himself instead to the study of eloquence, Greek, and Barbaro's never sufficiently praised Themistius. He nevertheless admits, speaking frankly, that he is disgusted when *grammatistae*, teachers who taught grammar to schoolboys, discover the etymology of a couple of words and then run around ostentatiously boasting that, in comparison to themselves, philosophers are of no account.[94]

Although Pico is speaking *in propria persona* in this final section of the letter, it does not lend itself to straightforward interpretation any more easily than the prosopopoeia of the scholastic. In the first place, Pico's outburst against the *grammatistae* should not be construed as a jibe at Barbaro and his like but rather reflects a view held by most humanists, who looked down on these humble schoolteachers as a breed apart from *grammatici*, erudite exponents of Greek and Latin literature, like

[91] See his letter to Aldus Manutius, dated February 11, 1490, in Pico, *Opera*, 359: "... philosophia veritatem quaerit, theologia invenit, religio possidet."

[92] Barbaro and Pico, *Filosofia*, 62: "Hic, infantissimus dicendo, sentit ea quae laudari dicendo satis non possunt; ille, fando eloquentissimus, eloquitur nefanda."

[93] Ibid.: "Quorum sententiae nec ego plane accedo.... Sed exercui me libenter in hac materia tanquam infami, ut qui quartanam laudant, cum ut ingenium periclitarer, tum hoc consilio: ut, veluti Glauco ille apud Platonem iniustitiam laudat, non ex iudicio, sed ut ad laudes iustitiae Socratem extimulet, ita ego, ut concitatius eloquentiae causam a te agi audiam, in eam licentius – repugnante paulisper sensu atque natura – invectus sum...." See Aulus Gellius *Attic Nights* XVII.12 for Favorinus's praise of subjects such as quartan fever, and on mock encomia, see A. S. Pease, "Things without Honor," *Classical Philology* 21 (1926): 27–42. For Glaucon's praise of injustice, see Plato *Republic* 360E–362C.

[94] Barbaro and Pico, *Filosofia*, 62, 64: "... quam [sc. eloquentiam] si vel negligendam vel posthabendam barbaris existimarem, non ab illis ad eam, quod nuper feci, ad Graecas litteras, ad tuum nunquam satis laudatum Themistium paene totus defecissem. Quamvis (dicam libere quod sentio) movent mihi stomachum grammatistae quidam, qui, cum duas tenuerint vocabulorum origines, ita se ostentant, ita venditant, ita circunferunt iactabundi, ut prae seipsis pro nihilo habendos philosophos arbitrentur."

themselves.[95] According to Poliziano, in his *Lamia*, the inaugural lecture for his 1491–2 course on Aristotle's *Prior Analytics*, cultivated and learned people, *litterati*, had cause for complaint that nowadays those who taught basic grammar were called by the Greek term *grammatici*, equivalent to the Latin *litterati*, instead of the correct Greek word *grammatistae*, equivalent to the Latin *litteratores*, elementary instructors.[96] Seen in this light, the scholastic's comment that philosophers were not concerned to achieve fame among schoolteachers deserves to be taken seriously.[97]

Secondly, Pico's claim to have abandoned the scholastics in favor of more humanist pursuits should not be taken at face value, any more than his glib pronouncement, after reading Poliziano's 1479 translation of the *Enchiridion*, that he had been so won over by his friend's eloquent rendition of Epictetus's Stoic discourse that he had transferred his philosophical allegiance from Aristotle's Lyceum and Plato's Academy to the Stoa.[98] In July 1485, a month after writing the letter to Barbaro, Pico went to Paris in order to continue his studies of scholastic philosophy and theology, remaining there until March 1486.[99] A few months later he was in Rome preparing his *900 Theses*, the first 115 of which are taken from Latin scholastic philosophers – Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, Francis of Meyronnes, Duns Scotus, Henry of Ghent, and Giles of Rome; a mere five come from Themistius.[100] In his *Apology*, Pico demonstrated the orthodoxy of the condemned theses by drawing on a wide range of scholastic theological authorities, both medieval and contemporary.[101] Before losing his right to use the Vatican Library on account of the condemnation, he appears in the loan register as having borrowed and returned three volumes from the collection, all concerning scholastic metaphysics

[95] Robert Black, *Humanism and Education in Medieval and Renaissance Italy: Tradition and Innovation in Latin Schools from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 31–3, 365. See also n. 52 above.

[96] Angelo Poliziano, *Lamia: Praelectio in Priora Aristotelis analytica*, ed. Ari Wesseling (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 17: ". . . indignari litterati possunt quod grammatici nunc appellentur etiam qui prima doceant elementa. Ceterum apud Graecos hoc genus non grammatici, sed grammatistae, non litterati apud Latinos, sed litteratores vocabantur." See Suetonius *De grammaticis* 4.

[97] See n. 38 above.

[98] See his undated letter to Poliziano, in Poliziano, *Letters*, 1:20–23, at 22: ". . . cum semper in Lycio vel Academia, nunquam in Porticu sim versatus, ita victus sum oratione senis ut in eius sententiam non pedibus modo, sed manibus quoque et toto corpore discesserim."

[99] Garin, *Giovanni Pico*, 24–5.

[100] Farmer, *Syncretism*, 212–49, 294–5. See also Stefano Caroti, "Note sulle fonti medievali di Pico della Mirandola," *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana* 84 (2005): 60–92, at 62–72.

[101] Caroti, "Note sulle fonti," 72–85.

and natural philosophy: Thomas Aquinas's *De ente et essentia*, astrological writings by Roger Bacon, and the *Speculum naturalium* of Henry Bate.[102] Scholastic philosophy and theology were well represented among the manuscripts and printed books in his own extensive library, works by Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas making up the lion's share.[103] Far from deserting the scholastics, Pico was running into their arms.

Given the complexity of the letter and its ambiguous relationship to Pico's own opinions, it is hardly surprising that conflicting interpretations were soon put forward, each presenting only half the picture. Barbaro, in replying to Pico, suggested that the letter was an elaborate joke, in which the scholastic philosopher's rhetorical style and classical learning were designed to undermine his case and to support instead a humanist agenda.[104] This was also the view of Poliziano.[105] Neither humanist could countenance the idea that Pico might genuinely have found something of value in the scholastic philosophy they both despised. In 1558 the German scholar Franz Burchard, dissatisfied with Barbaro's reply to Pico, composed his own response, which for several centuries was wrongly attributed to his teacher Philip Melanchthon.[106] Taking Pico's assault on humanist rhetoric to be deadly serious, Burchard set out to defend the discipline and to attack the scholastic theologians of his own day.[107]

[102] Maria Bertòla, *I primi registri di prestito della Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana: Codici Vaticani latini 3964, 3966* (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1942), 79–80; see also Grafton, "*Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*," 93, 105.

[103] Pearl Kibre, *The Library of Pico della Mirandola* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936); see also Caroti, "Note sulle fonti," 86–91.

[104] See his undated letter to Pico, in Barbaro and Pico, *Filosofia*, 66–95, at 66, 68: "... ut ea mihi res et festivior et iucundior eveniret, homo lepidissimus, humanissimus, latinissimus barbaros contra Barbarum defendis, ut hostis pro hoste, socius contra socium, ipse contra te ipsum stare patrocinarique simulares." See also the English translation in Breen, "Giovanni Pico," 403–12. On the letter, see Letizia Panizza, "Ermolao Barbaro e Pico della Mirandola tra retorica e dialettica: Il *De genere dicendi philosophorum* del 1485," in Marangoni and Stocchi, *Una famiglia veneziana nella storia*, 277–330; Margolin, "Sur la conception humaniste," 268–75; McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation*, 238–41; Valcke, *Pic de la Mirandole*, 113–14; Vickers, *In Defence*, 189–92.

[105] See his letter to Bernardo Ricci, assigned to the spring of 1494 by Bausi (*Nec rhetor*, 17), in Poliziano, *Opera*, 118–19, at 118: "Gero equidem morem, descriptamque tibi epistolam Pici mitto, qua barbaros philosophos adversus Hermolaum Barbarum, sed nihil minus quam barbarum, defendit. . . ."

[106] Erika Rummel, "*Epistola Hermolai nova ac subditicia*: A Declamation Falsely Ascribed to Philip Melanchthon," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 83 (1992): 302–5.

[107] Burchard's letter is published in Philip Melanchthon, *Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. C. G. Bretschneider, 28 vols. (Halle and Braunschweig: C. A. Schwetschke et Filius, 1834–60), vol. 9, cols. 687–703; see also the English translation in Quirinus Breen,

In the past, scholarly discussions of Pico's letter have tended to follow Burchard's line, but in more recent literature, Barbaro's view has gained favor.[108] Both interpretations, however, are one-sided and fail to provide a convincing explanation of the contrast between the substance of the letter – the positive assessment of scholastic philosophy, which, as we have seen, there is good reason to believe represents Pico's own attitude – and the rhetorical, humanist style in which it is written. Nor do the conflicting accounts of Pico's manner of writing put forward by Louis Valcke and Francesco Bausi resolve the problem.[109] A possible solution can, however, be found by comparing the letter to Barbaro with Pico's *Oration*.

As was appropriate for a keynote address intended to introduce the Roman disputation, the speech is written in an extravagantly rhetorical style, brimming with classical elegance and humanist erudition. Since, however, the topic of the disputation was philosophy and theology, Pico devotes the bulk of the speech to praising these disciplines as the means to attain the highest human dignity described in the more famous opening section. The program that Pico sets out, though dressed up in metaphorical language, essentially follows the standard scholastic curriculum, beginning with ethics, which teaches us to control our passions and emotions; moving on to logic, which guides our reason, and then to natural philosophy, which resolves disputes and disagreements of opinion; and finally arriving at theology, which provides us with true tranquility and peace of mind.[110] So in the *Oration* Pico drew on the resources of humanism to extol scholastic philosophy and theology.[111]

"Melanchthon's Reply to G. Pico della Mirandola," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 13 (1952): 413–26. On the letter, see Erika Rummel, *The Humanist-Scholastic Debate in the Renaissance and Reformation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 147–51; Valcke, *Pic de la Mirandole*, 114–21; Vickers, *In Defence*, 192–6.

[108] See the studies cited in n. 2 above.

[109] According to Valcke, Pico alternated his styles, adopting an elaborate rhetorical manner in the *Oration* and his correspondence with humanists but writing in a plain and simple fashion in philosophical works such as the *900 Theses*, *Apology*, and *De ente*, where clarity and precision were required; see Louis Valcke, "Jean Pic et le retour au 'style de Paris': Portée d'une critique littéraire," *Rinascimento* 32 (1992), 253–73, and his *Pic de la Mirandole*, chap. 4. Bausi, concentrating on the early works of 1484–7, traces an evolution in Pico's style that parallels his intellectual development and increasing philosophical maturity: see Bausi, *Nec rhetor*. On Valcke and Bausi, see Craven, "Style and Substance."

[110] Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Discorso della dignità dell'uomo*, ed. Francesco Bausi (Parma: Ugo Guanda, 2003), 28, 30. See also the English translation by Charles Glenn Wallis, in Pico, *On the Dignity of Man*, 1–34.

[111] Craven, "Style and Substance," 371–2.

If we assume that he was doing the same thing a year earlier when writing to Barbaro, the various paradoxes embodied in the letter can be readily unraveled. Pico's deliberate combination of humanist style and scholastic substance explains why the medieval philosopher makes extensive use of classical authors unknown to the Middle Ages but beloved of humanists. It explains why his supposedly barbaric language is modeled on the Silver Age Latin authors preferred by Barbaro.[112] It explains why Pico employs the rhetorical devices of prosopopoeia and mock encomium to challenge the value of rhetoric.

Pico's reason for adopting this tactic no doubt had to do with the eclecticism he championed in the *Oration*, swearing to follow the dictates of no master but instead reaching out to every philosopher, examining every text, and becoming familiar with every sect, because in each and every one there was something noteworthy not held in common with the others. What scholastic philosophy had to offer was the vigor and attention to detail of Duns Scotus, the solidity and sense of proportion of Thomas Aquinas, the terseness and precision of Giles of Rome, the astuteness and penetration of Francis of Meyronnes, the old-fashioned expansiveness and grandeur of Albertus Magnus, and the awe-inspiring sublimity of Henry of Ghent.[113] What humanist rhetoric had to offer was exceptional powers of persuasion. Pico brought these seemingly discordant movements together in both his *Oration* and his letter to Barbaro, using scholastic philosophy to discover the truth and humanist rhetoric to make others see the light.

[112] See Bausi, *Nec rhetor*, 35–55, at 37: "... il filosofo 'barbaro' ... [scrive] non come un 'barbaro' ma come 'il' Barbaro."

[113] Pico, *Discorso*, 84, 86: "... ego ita me institui ut in nullius verba iuratus, me per omnes philosophiae magistros funderem, omnes scedas excuterem, omnes familias agnoscerem. ... Adde quod in una quaque familia est aliquid insigne, quod non sit ei commune cum caeteris. Atque ut a nostris ... nunc exordiar, est in Ioanne Scoto vegetum quiddam atque discursum, in Thoma solidum et equabile, in Egidio tersum et exactum, in Francisco acre et acutum, in Alberto priscum, amplum et grande, in Henrico ... semper sublime et venerandum."

3

Pico, Theology, and the Church

Paul Richard Blum

"If you like him, have him write poetry rather than theological stuff, for that suits him better, since the Count lacks the foundations and hasn't seen as much as is needed for someone who writes on theology." This is the advice from Pope Innocent VIII that the ambassador Giovanni Lanfredini reported to his employer Lorenzo de' Medici on October 2, 1489, regarding the continuously hazardous theological publications of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.[1] It is unlikely that the Pope had these lines in mind, which the Count had written not long before:

> Misera Italia e tutta Europa intorno,
> che 'l tuo gran padre Papa iace e vende[2]

In tinkering with theology, Pico had attracted the ire of the pope, who, of course, had enough theologians in his service to issue condemnations and warnings. But peaceful Florence,[3] that is, Lorenzo de' Medici,

[1] Raffaella Maria Zaccaria, "Critiche e difesa dell'*Heptaplus*," in *Pico, Poliziano e L'Umanesimo di fine Quattrocento*, ed. Paolo Viti (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1994), nr. 16, 76–8, quoted on pages 76–7, from ms. Florence, Archivio di Stato, MAP 58, 96: "Et dixe [the Pope]: '. . . Se lui [Lorenzo] gli [Pico] vuole molto bene, che lo facci scrivere opere di poesia et non cose theologiche perché saranno più de sua denti, perché il conte non è bene fondato et non ha visto tanto quanto bisogna ad chi scrive theologia'"; also quoted in Domenico Berti, "Intorno a Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," *Rivista contemporanea* 16 (1859): 7–56, at 29, reprinted with original pagination in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Opera omnia*, vol. 2, ed. Eugenio Garin (Turin: Bottega d'Erasmo, 1971), 245–96. This second volume of the *Opera omnia* reprint, containing miscellaneous sources, will be referenced below as *Opera* II. See also Elisabetta Scarton, *Giovanni Lanfredini: Uomo d'affari e diplomatico nell'Italia del Quattrocento* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, forthcoming), chap. 7, §2.

[2] Sonetto XLV 1–2, in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Sonetti*, ed. Giorgio Dilemmi (Turin: Einaudi, 1994), 91. The poem can be dated to 1488. The accusation is that the pope is inert and sells out Italy: "Poor Italy and all Europe that your great father the Pope dismisses and sells."

[3] That is the meaning of the following line: "Marzoco a palla gioca e l'onge stende" ("Florence plays with balls [part of the Medici emblem] and retracts its claws").

managed to obtain a brief from the next pope, Alexander VI, that absolved the protégé from any suspicion of heresy. Gianfrancesco Pico, Giovanni's nephew, did not fail to put that at the head of his edition of his uncle's works.[4]

Giovanni Pico and his literary talents, his proficiency and orthodoxy in theology, his allegiance to the Medici, and the religious policy of Rome – all this was at stake. To begin with the religious policy: when Giovanni Pico called for a great council in Rome to discuss 900 theses in late 1486, he encountered immediate suspicion and enmity. After Innocent VIII had become pope in 1484, one of his first acts had been to send a letter of enthusiastic support to the University of Paris, where Pico soon after was to study and from where he brought the project and the ideas of his Roman disputation. What Paris meant to philosophy and theology was to become one of the issues in the debate. While Pico was still preparing for the great event, critical voices arose – unfortunately we do not know who these critics were.[5] According to Gianfrancesco's *Vita* of Giovanni, they were driven by envy,[6] a conclusion which he may have inferred from Giovanni's statements in his *Oratio*, which was supposed to open the debate and evidently responded already to such critics. Some, Giovanni says, "do not approve of this whole method of disputation and of this institution of publicly debating on learning [more precisely, on letters]"; others "in no wise approve it in me because I, born I admit but twenty-four years ago, should have dared at my age to offer a disputation concerning the lofty mysteries of Christian theology . . . in so famous a city"; and still others "misrepresent [the disputation] as being a work as unnecessary and as ostentatious."[7] Before long, Pico will have to add

[4] See Giovanni Di Napoli, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola e la problematica dottrinale del suo tempo* (Rome: Desclée, 1965), 116–7, 136 n. 133. The *Breve* also is in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Opera* (Basel: Heinricpetri, 1572; reprinted as *Opera omnia*, Turin: Bottega d'Erasmo, 1971), fol. *1v.

[5] See Di Napoli, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, 89, 126, and Léon Dorez and Louis Thuasne, *Pic de la Mirandole en France* (Paris: Leroux, 1897; reprinted with original pagination in Pico della Mirandola, *Opera* II, 391–443), 57–8.

[6] Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *Ioannis Pici Mirandulae . . . vita . . .*, in Pico della Mirandola, *Opera*, fol. *3v: "pestifera corrupti invidia."

[7] Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, in *Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Ernst Cassirer et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 239; Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oratio*, in *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno e scritti vari*, ed. Eugenio Garin (Florence: Vallecchi, 1942), 132–4 (hereafter referred to as *Scritti vari*). Pico seems to be responding spontaneously to recent criticisms; see Pier Cesare Bori, *Pluralità delle vie: Alle origini del* Discorso *sulla dignità umana di Pico della Mirandola* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2000), 81.

more accusations, namely, being a magician, impious, and a new leader of heresy in the Church,[8] for the murmurs had grown into a formal inquiry into Pico's *900 Theses*. The fact that in the *Breve* that instituted the commission Innocent VIII equally referred to the judgment of "some learned people"[9] without giving names allows the hypothesis that the members of the commission were those who had lobbied against the young scholar or that the pope himself wanted to chastise Pico. His motivation might have been a tense political relationship with the Medici of Florence, specifically Lorenzo,[10] whose prodigal protégé Pico happened to be. Further interpretation of the commission and its motivation would depend on identifying the scholarly expertise of its members and their interaction at the papal curia. The fact is that, of the sixteen members, four belonged to the Franciscan family, two were Dominicans, one was a Servite religious, and another an Augustinian.[11] It is also noteworthy that one member, Johannes Cordier, a theologian and later rector of the University of Paris, "defected" by helping Pico escape to France after the condemnation.[12]

The commission found thirteen theses that needed clarification and were in various degrees condemned. The propositions and their qualifications by the commissions were as follows:[13]

[8] After rephrasing the previous criticisms, he adds that some theologians even call him not only light-minded, "sed magum, sed impium, sed novum in Christi ecclesia haeresiarcham." See Pico della Mirandola, *Apologia*, in *Opera*, 115.

[9] See Dorez and Thuasne, *Pic de la Mirandole en France*, 59, 114: "judicio quorundam doctissimorum virorum." On the process, see Albano Biondi, "La doppia inchiesta sulle *Conclusiones* e le traversie romane di Pico nel 1487," in *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Convegno internazionale di studi nel cinquecentesimo anniversario della morte (1494–1994)*, ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini (Florence: Olschki, 1997), 197–212.

[10] See Roberto Palmarocchi, *La politica italiana di Lorenzo de' Medici* (Florence: Olschki, 1933).

[11] A list and some biographical data are available in Di Napoli, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, 91, 127ff. According to Valcke, the Franciscans and most of the other members represented the *via moderna*, being voluntarists and fideists; see Louis Valcke, *Pic de la Mirandole: Un itinéraire philosophique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2005), 269, 273.

[12] See Di Napoli, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, 103–5. Dorez and Thuasne call it "la défection de Jean Cordier" in *Pic de la Mirandole en France*, 189.

[13] I quote the English version of the theses with numbering from S. A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486)* (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Text and Studies, 1998). In Pico's *Opera* the incriminated theses are summarized (p. 62) and marked (92–5), except for theses 7 and 11, which are not marked (105). The commission's judgments are my translation from Dorez and Thuasne, *Pic de la Mirandole en France*, 127–37. I render *scandalosus* as "outrageous" and *heresim sapere* as "to smack of heresy." On the history of interpretations of these theses, see William G. Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Symbol of His Age* (Geneva: Droz, 1981), chap. 3.

1. Christ did not truly and in respect to his real presence descend into hell as Thomas and the common way propose, but only in effect. (4>8)
   Wrong, erroneous, heretical.
2. The second is: that for a mortal sin of a finite time an infinite temporal penalty is not due, but only a finite penalty. (4>20)
   Wrong, erroneous, heretical.
3. Neither the Cross of Christ, nor any image, should be adored with the adoration of veneration, even in that way that Thomas proposes. (4>14)
   Outrageous, offensive to pious ears, and unaccustomed in the universal Church.
4. I do not agree with the common opinion of the theologians saying that God can assume any nature, but I concede this of the rational nature. (4>13)
   Smacks of heresy.
5. It is not in the free power of man to believe that an article of faith is true when it pleases him and to believe that it is false when it pleases him. (Corollary to 4>18)
   Erroneous and smacks of heresy.
6. It is more rational to believe that Origen is saved, than to believe that he is damned. (4>29)
   Imprudent, to be refuted, smacks of heresy, being contrary to the declarations of the Church.
7. There is no science that assures us more of the divinity of Christ than magic and Cabala. (9>9)
   Wrong, erroneous, superstitious, heretical.
8. Whoever says that an accident cannot exist unless it exists in something can uphold the sacrament of the Eucharist, even maintaining that the substance of the bread does not remain as the common way holds. (4>1)
   Erroneous.
9. If the common way is maintained concerning the possibility of assumption in respect to any creature, I say that without the conversion of the bread into the body of Christ, or the annihilation of the breadness, the body of Christ can exist on the altar in accordance with the truth of the sacrament of the Eucharist. This is said speaking of what is possible, however, not of what is so. (4>2)
   Wrong and in matters of faith erroneous.
10. Those words: *This is my body*, etc., which are spoken in the Consecration, are held in a material and not indicative sense. (4>10)
    Outrageous, contrary to the opinion of the Church Fathers.

11. The miracles of Christ are the most certain argument of his divinity, not because of the things he did, but because of the way in which he did them. (9>8)
    Can be taken wrongly being presented among the magic theses.
12. It is more improperly said that God is intellect or that which has intellect, than that the rational soul is an angel. (3>49)
    Wrong and can be twisted to a heretical meaning.
13. The soul understands nothing in act and distinctly except itself. (3>60)
    Wrong.

On first sight, this list looks like a random collection; even if we see in individual cases what might have troubled the censors, it is hard to find a common denominator between these topics, which range from Christology to the Eucharist to epistemology. From another point of view, many more propositions could have been questioned. For instance, the seventh thesis is declared to be heretical, while the eleventh thesis is mentioned only because it may lead to magic – but none of the other twenty-four propositions on magic has been listed. So, what is wrong with magic? Probably, the theologians held magic to be acceptable as long as it was kept clear of theological – especially Christological – implications. They would thus uphold a barrier between natural philosophy and theology that Pico trespassed – deliberately so, as we will see. More interestingly, thesis 4>9, immediately following the first questionable thesis, was not disputed, even though it may put all rational theology into jeopardy: "Although it seems probable to me, it should not be obstinately asserted that the soul of Christ could not have descended into hell in another way unknown to us."[14] Pico works with a threefold negation (should not be asserted, could not have descended, unknown), which makes the item debatable indeed, especially since its core is stated as only probable: he deems it probable that Christ acted in a way unknown to us; or: Pico admits that ignorance is a serious probability – but we should not insist on that. This is what theology is about, according to Pico. His approach is not, of course, skepticism but rather the technique of exploring the scope of human understanding in matters of faith. This technique he

[14] Farmer remarks that this proposition comments upon the preceding one; see his *Syncretism in the West*, 427. There is no intellectualism entailed in this and the preceding thesis, as Valcke seems to argue; see Louis Valcke, "L''Averroisme latin,' la condamnation de 1277 et Jean Pic de la Mirandole (1463–1494)," *Lavale Théologique et Philosophique* 56 (2000): 127–50, at 149, and also Valcke, *Pic de la Mirandole*, 274–6.

learned both in Paris and in humanism, which is one of disputation and literary learning, as he claimed in his *Oratio*.[15]

Immediately after the verdict, within twenty nights,[16] Pico wrote a response, his *Apologia*. Whether he did so in order to be ahead of the formal interdict to further publish on that matter[17] is not important at this point. But we may gather from the speed of his writing that he was well prepared and hence infer that his 126 folio pages actually are samples of how he would have defended the 900 theses had the congress taken place. As to the defense and to Pico's attitude toward theology on a whole, the following issues need to be discussed: his view of Parisian, or scholastic, theology; his engaging in nontechnical literary devices and sources, which encompass also his biblical hermeneutics; and his orthodoxy and piety.

The first observation to be made is that Pico displays ample knowledge of scholasticism in that he defends every single criticism of his propositions by quoting a host of medieval authorities. He is fully aware of the intricacies of the debates that had taken place, to the extent that one cannot identify Pico with any single school. He is also knowledgeable concerning enmities but takes advantage of these by setting himself above such discussions. For instance, in the context of his thesis concerning Christ's descent to hell (1 or 4>8), he refers to the condemnation of 1277 and not only points out inner contradictions between some articles but also quotes English doctors who refused to respect the prohibition at all: "The English say, that these articles did not cross the sea, wherefore I may say . . . they don't cross the Alps." Therefore, to maintain that his proposition violates the creed, the *Symbolum Apostolicum*, should be modified as violating the *Symbolum Parisinum*, which is wrong anyway.[18] Nevertheless, Pico pays respect to the Parisian way of teaching, since he had studied it, especially when he can show that the Scotists, Bonaventure, and Aquinas seem to agree with one another.

This was the case in the definition of the presence and location of spiritual substances, on which hinges the correctness of his statement on

[15] See n. 7 above. On Pico's attitude toward skepticism, see Anna De Pace, *La scepsi, il sapere e l'anima: Dissonanze nella cerchia laurenziana* (Milan: LED, 2002), chap. 2.

[16] See *Apologia*, 236; Gianfrancesco Pico, *Vita*, in Pico della Mirandola, *Opera*, fol. *3v.

[17] Innocent VIII believed this was the reason why Pico had his *Apology* printed "in una grotta a Napoli," according to Lanfredini's report to Lorenzo. See Berti, "Intorno a Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," 54. See also Di Napoli, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, 95, 523.

[18] *Apologia*, 130.

Christ's descent. Pico clarifies that the "common way" he referred to was that of the nominalists at Paris, and here he brings them into concordance with Aquinas. Pico confesses that he presented his thesis as "probable" only, out of respect for Paris, even though he could have maintained it positively.[19] Later on he argues against the assumption that the entire school of Paris taught extreme voluntarism. Defending the fifth allegedly mistaken and perhaps heretical thesis about the "freedom of belief," as he now terms it, he explains that "the entire university of Paris" agreed with him for the reason that the opposite statement would be outright impossible and has never been defended by anyone.[20] The opposite, I suppose, would be: "One may believe whatever one wants to believe." He explains his statement with reference to Augustine, noting that the mere command of will cannot persuade without some motivation by reason; that is, words alone and choice make no faith.[21] Most likely, the censors would have taken offense at the wording, which may sound as though one were not free to believe.

However, Petrus Garsia, a member of the commission and an author of a treatise against Pico's *Apology*, was able to refute Pico's arguments only by introducing an element that had not played a role in the argument so far; in addition to will and intellect, *fides infusa* (light of faith) is needed to believe as a Christian does. Garsia explained, "Together with the command of will the intellect is sufficiently determined and elevated to Christian belief, when the light of faith comes upon it."[22] In making faith primarily a superadded infusion that transforms both will and intellect, Garsia pushed the debate toward what would become a major issue in Reformation theology, namely, the role of grace in the act of belief. This was not what Pico intended to debate. Rather, he explored the cognitive interaction of understanding and determination, and therefore he complains that his readers were unwilling to understand that the incriminated statement was a corollary to the main thesis, according to which "no one believes that something is true precisely because he wills to believe that it is true."[23]

[19] Ibid., 134ff.

[20] Ibid., 225.

[21] Ibid., 225: "[A]d hoc, quod aliquis [propositionem] credat vel discredat, non sufficit mera apprehensio terminorum, et merum imperium voluntatis."

[22] Petrus Garsias, *Determinationes magistrales contra conclusiones apologales Joannis Pici Mirandulani* (Rome: Silber, 1489), fol. e8r: "sed superveniente lumine fidei sufficienter determinatur et elevatur intellectus una cum imperio voluntatis ad credendum christiane."

[23] Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 431 (thesis 4>18). The emphasis is on "praecise quia vult."

Before making an effort to convince his readers, he mentions that the main proposition and the corollary are connected (*concatenantur*). It is known that a corollary in scholastic argumentation is a hint at a logical consequence that still remains on the level of an additional qualification of the main point. Pico's understanding of "concatenation," however, goes much further. To accuse the commission not to have heeded the obvious linkage within that single thesis extends to his claim that the entire set of 900 theses is tied together with some "hidden concatenation."[24] Incidentally, he mentions this in the context of the last criticized thesis (3>60), which he discusses under the new heading: "Disputation on the hidden understanding of the soul."[25] This is explained as that kind of intuition that works without reference to phantasms, that is, intuition as distinct from cognition of external objects. Since it is on this occasion that Pico declares to have designed all his disputation theses by way of an internal linkage, he must not only refer to the well-known technique of scholastic argumentation that always keeps track of the further implications of one solution to a problem for other issues. We may infer that he gives a clue to his entire project; he transforms scholastic disputation into an inquiry into the powers of the soul, powers that gain access to the unifying spirit of knowledge.

Thus, what appears at first sight to be endorsing this or that minority opinion within or without Parisian theology is in fact transcending scholastic rationalism. In concluding his defense, he therefore addresses his readers thus: "Those who hate me should not read what is our opinion, and those who like me, equally should not read that, because from what is mine they may come to think much of what is not ours."[26] This rather cryptic conclusion seems to say that Pico deliberately intends to bridge between the common opinion ("ours") and alien teachings by way of his own thoughts, which need to be taken as dialectical. Indeed, shortly before the quoted statement, he refers to Averroës and Alexander as examples of those who are infidels but whose teachings nevertheless are proposed for disputation "in a scholastic exercise in the style of academies."[27]

[24] *Apologia*, 235: "in omnibus meis conclusionibus, semper occulta quaedam est concatenatio."

[25] Ibid.: "De abdita intelligentia animae disputatio."

[26] Ibid., 237: "Qui ergo me oderunt, ideo illa non legant, quia nostra sunt: qui me amant, ideo non legant, quia ex illis, quae mea sunt, cogitare plurima possunt, quae non sunt nostra."

[27] Ibid., 237: "scholasticam tamen exercitationem meditantes, de more Academiarum."

What scholastic disputation can amount to, in a technical sense, is evident in a passage where Pico defends his thesis that God can assume only a rational nature (4>13). Here he concedes that to an untrained listener such a statement may sound outrageous, but not more than other propositions that follow from God's absolute potency, such as "God is an ass; God is wood; . . . God can be condemned to hell; God can be tortured by the devil; the Devil can be God."[28] So, in the eyes of his critics, his proposition seemed to diminish God's omnipotence, but from that very omnipotence follow no less outrageous consequences. This method can be found in several passages of his *Apology*. He discredits dogmatic scholasticism by pondering the absurdity of a contrary position, to the effect that the positive proposition turns out not to be falsifiable. A few years later, Pico would participate in a disputation organized by Lorenzo de' Medici in which the proposition was debated that "every effect of any good or evil – whatever its name – has God as its proper and principal cause." Angelo Poliziano would go as far as to maintain succinctly that God is the cause of good and evil.[29] It should be noted that the thesis is fairly compatible with Pico's "Cabbalistic" thesis 28.5, which states, "With the tree of knowledge of good and evil, in which the first man sinned, God created the world."[30] If sin emerges from knowledge, how much more from scholastic debates?

For one thing, Pico stretches the mode of disputation to its limits in showing that the exercise of the mind, not petrified conclusions, is the aim of such debates. This was also his strategy in the imputed defense of Origen (4>29). Not only had Origen written before certain dogmas of the Church had been issued,[31] he also had expressly disclaimed to pronounce dogmas rather than questions and proposals, so that Pico repeatedly insists on the right to pronounce opinions in an "inquisitive

[28] Ibid., 165.

[29] See Armando F. Verde, *Lo studio fiorentino 1473–1503*, vol. IV/2 (Florence: Olschki, 1985), 822–31, and Salvatore I. Camporeale, "L'esegesi umanistica del Valla e il simposio teologico di Lorenzo il Magnifico: L'intervento di Poliziano," *Vivens homo* 5 (1994): 431–44, at 437–9. See also Paul Richard Blum, *Philosophieren in der Renaissance* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2004), 183ff.

[30] Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 347 (thesis 28.5); "world" is the translation for "saeculum." In his note on this thesis, Farmer indicates that the tree refers not only to the paradise but also to the ten *sefirot*, so knowledge and sin go along with the creation of the secular world.

[31] See *Apologia*, 210. See also Henri Crouzel, *Une controverse sur Origène à la Renaissance: Jean Pic de la Mirandole et Pierre Garcia* (Paris: Vrin, 1977), 132–4, §29.

and not positive way."[32] This was what Pico had intended, namely, to explore the scope and depth of Christian teaching by extending the canon of authorities and the potential of questions. He was perhaps the first to rehabilitate Origen in the theological debate,[33] and he evidently did so precisely in order to emphasize the profoundly inquisitive nature of theological discourse, for which he complacently drew a parallel to St. Augustine, who had admitted that in his commentary on Genesis there were "more questions than findings."[34] Pico explains his view of a debate thus:

> The rationale of what is submitted for debate is different from that of what is given in writing to read for teaching. What is submitted for debate is submitted in a brief, concise, and unexplained statement, so that it contains various difficulties of words and meanings, which are to be solved during the discussion; otherwise, if everything were already clarified, there would be nothing to discuss. Therefore, he who brings forward an obscure and equivocal proposition must be excused, because it will turn out that he will sharpen and clarify it during the debate. . . . Also . . . it is not only difficult but rather impossible to weigh and ponder the words of every statement that someone submits, so that there could be no ambiguity and no erroneous opinion could arise from it. . . .[35]

Therefore, the function of a scholastic disputation is, indeed, to clarify thoughts by suggesting propositions that need and deserve interpretation.

With that we come to a second implication of Pico's transformation of scholasticism, which one could term the inherent fallibility of human

[32] *Apologia*, 209: "inquisistive non determinative"; 212: "neque dogmatice neque assertive . . . non determinando, sed inquirendo . . . 'Haec iuxta nostram sententiam non sint dogmata, sed quaesita tantum atque proiecta.'" See Crouzel, *Une controverse sur Origène*, 130, §27; 138, §§32–3.

[33] See Edgar Wind, "The Revival of Origen," in *Studies in Art and Literature for Belle da Costa Greene*, ed. Dorothy Miner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), 412–24. I hope to show elsewhere that Coluccio Salutati had been influenced by Origen's biblical hermeneutics.

[34] *Apologia*, 212. See Crouzel, *Une controverse sur Origène*, 138, §32.

[35] *Apologia*, 148: "quod alia est ratio eorum, quae proponuntur disputanda, alia eorum, quae ad doctrinam in scriptis traduntur legenda. Cum enim quid disputandum proponitur, brevis et concisa, et inexplicita proponitur propositio, in se et verborum et sensuum multiplices implicans difficultates, in ipso dispuntandi congressu dissolvendas, alioquin si omnia ibi explicarentur, disputationi locus non relinqueretur: proptera ambiguam, obscuram vel aequivocam propositionem ponens disputandam, ideo excusatur, quia futurum est, ut inter disputandum ipsam distinguat, et declaret. . . . Secundo . . . non solum difficile, sed pene impossibile esse, ita librare et examinare verba omnium propositionum, quas quis proponit, ut nulla possit esse in sensu ambiguitas, et erronea inde opinio nulla elici possit."

discourse: heresy is anthropologically inevitable and thus legally impossible. When Pico, in the quoted passage, maintains that written statements differ from disputations, he obviously referred to dogmatic teachings. These, he postulates, should be "clear, evident, and accessible."[36] But then he apologizes himself, saying that his way of speaking cannot arrogate what even the apostolic and biblical scriptures do not offer, which have multifold meanings, can be twisted into erroneous meanings, and on face value may even be heretical. Actually, all heresies stem from adhering to the "cortex verborum,"[37] the rind of words, without penetrating their inner truth. Examples are handy, for instance, Arianism. All heresies pay too much attention to the "grammatical force."[38] Now, the censors repeatedly refer to the "vis verborum," the meaning of the words as they stand, thus regularly employing a legal understanding and brushing off explanations that Pico had offered. In the case of Christ's presence in hell, Pico counters with an exercise in the power of a word. Over two pages folio, he analyzes the meaning of the Italian word *li* (there) within the logical structure of his proposition, followed by a clarification of the word *sed*.[39] He clearly suggests that his censors should have paid attention to the literal meaning of words in so far as they pertain to scholastic exercises.

Tellingly, this invective is followed by an account of various opinions on the matter held by Thomas Aquinas, who is said to have advocated "one opinion in one place, another in another."[40] In another chapter, Pico goes so far as to claim that the Roman theologians seem to believe that "there is no other theologian, and Thomas' way is every and the entire way."[41] In accordance with his method of comparing and differentiating the various theological schools, Pico contributes here to the opposition against the growing Thomism, as Lorenzo Valla had done before him

[36] Ibid., 148: "clara, dilucida et expedita."

[37] This is a current expression for the hermeneutic problem of reading poetic and biblical texts; see Alanus ab Insulis, *De planctu naturae*, Tertia quaestio, responsio, 451 C: "At, in superficiali litterae cortice falsum resonat lyra poetica, sed interius, auditoribus secretum intelligentiae altioris eloquitur, ut exteriore falsitatis abjecto putamine, dulciorem nucleum veritatis secrete intus lector inveniat." See also Bonaventure, Prologus in *Breviloquium*, §4: "sub cortice litterae apertae occultatur mystica et profunda intelligentia."

[38] *Apologia*, 148: "non tam profunditatem sensus introspiciebant, quam quid cortex verborum Evangelicorum sonet, attendebant. . . . attendens potius vim grammaticalem illius dictionis."

[39] Ibid., 134f. (misprinted in text, however, as 143).

[40] Ibid., 137.

[41] Ibid., 158: "quod nullum alium doctorem viderint, exisitmarent modum Thomae esse omnem modum."

and Pico's friend Battista Mantovano after him. While Valla had called for a return to piety in the tradition of the Apostle Paul, Mantovano had integrated Aquinas into the evolution of the Christian interpretation of truth.[42] Pico seems to side with both. For on the one hand, only the Holy Scripture is to be regarded as true, and on the other, even that is open to interpretation.

But Pico's most valuable trump card is St. Augustine; in exploring the deeper meaning of Christ's resurrection and presence in the inferno, Pico claims to have followed the way of examination of the Church Father who, speaking of heresies, had admitted that "nothing is more difficult than to tell that something is heretical or not," simply for the fact that to one authority a statement sounds heretical that does not seem so to another.[43] Even though the Bible has the highest authority, there are problems that are simply not determined by it, as is the case with the ontological state of Christ in the descent into hell. Therefore, one must rely on the authority of the Church Fathers, whose writings go beyond the Bible, but their teaching is "not of so firm an authority and immobility that one may not contradict them . . . where we gain no certain truth nor doubtless belief, there we give assent with doubt and fear of error."[44] This statement that is at the same time self-conscious and skeptical is then corroborated with a lengthy digression, based on Augustine, that proves that the theologians, not least Augustine himself, always were haunted by the doubt that the authorities tend to contradict one another and that only a thorough study of the Bible can dispel anxiety and pride on the basic assumption that apparent inconsistencies must be due to errors in the manuscript or to misunderstandings.[45]

Already in his early letter to Ermolao Barbaro (1485), Pico had tried to reconcile language and thought. He exposed the problem of saying

[42] See Johannes Baptista Spagnoli [Mantovano], *Opus aureum in Thomistas*, in Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Le thomisme et la pensée italienne de la Renaissance* (Paris: Vrin, 1967), 127–85; Lorenzo Valla, *Encomium Sancti Thomae Aquinatis*, in J. Vahlen, "Lorenzo Valla über Thomas von Aquino," *Vierteljahrsschrift für Kultur und Literatur der Renaissance* 1 (1886): 384–96, reprinted in Lorenzo Valla, *Opera omnia*, ed. Eugenio Garin (Turin: Bottega d'Erasmo, 1962), vol. 2. Cf. Paul Richard Blum, "Truth Thrives in Diversity: Battista Mantovano and Lorenzo Valla on Thomas Aquinas," *Verbum: Analecta Neolatina* 6 (2004): 215–26.

[43] *Apologia*, 126: "Nihil esse difficilius, quam definire, hoc est haereticum, aut non haereticum."

[44] Ibid., 143: "ex quo enim ibi certa veritas et indubia fides non est, ei semper assentitur, cum dubio et cum formidine falsi."

[45] Ibid., 144–7. Pico quotes Augustine, letter 82, *Ad Hieronymum*, §3, at 147.

the truth in words, following Cicero's *Orator*, in a paradoxical eulogy of scholastic parlance.[46] He reports the commonplace that it is preferable to read "sacred stories, written rustically rather than elegantly," which are certainly better than "all that elaborated sort of discourse."[47] But soon the argument turns upside down: yes, the defender of scholasticism admits, this style appears to be "dull, rude, uncultured," but only because it is written for the initiated, in the same way as the Ancients used to conceal their mysteries in fables in order to keep the uninitiated away, who would "pollute [them] with even more repulsive make-up of words [*amariori paulum cortice verborum*]."[48] Finally, after a play with "arbitrary" names that happen to employ those of scholastic schools (Roman, French, British, Spanish, "or even what the vulgar are accustomed to call Parisian"),[49] he deplores that philosophers "have separated wisdom from eloquence"[50] so that "Scotus philosophizes better than that other man who speaks more elegantly." But now comes the punch line: "The one has a tasteless mouth [*os insipidum*], the other a foolish head [*mens insipiens*]."[51] For the sake of our argument, it is critical that the "cortex verborum" is entirely on the side of the uncouth. The ironical remarks

[46] See Ermolao Barbaro and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Filosofia o eloquenza?* ed. Francesco Bausi (Naples: Liguori, 1998), "Introduction," at 7, 19, with edition of the texts. On the various interpretations of this letter, see Francesco Borghesi, "Tracce e congetture per un percorso nel genere epistolare: premessa a una recensio del carteggio pichiano," *Schede umanistiche* 14 (2000): 33–98; at 84–7. For the context within Barbaro's work, see Letizia Panizza, "Ermolao Barbaro e Pico della Mirandola tra retorica e dialettica: Il '*De genere dicendi philosophorum*' del 1485," in *Una famiglia veneziana nella storia: I Barbaro*, ed. Michela Marangoni and Manlio Pastore Stocchi (Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze Lettere ed Arti, 1996), 277–330.

[47] Quirinus Breen, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola on the Conflict of Philosophy and Rhetoric," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 13 (1952): 384–426, at 396; Barbaro and Pico della Mirandola, *Filosofia o eloquenza?* 42; Pico della Mirandola, *Opera*, 353. The formula is present in Alanus ab Insulis, *Summa de arte praedicatoria* (Migne PL 210, col. 163 D). I am grateful to Arthur Lesley for this reference.

[48] Breen, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," 397; Barbaro and Pico della Mirandola, *Filosofia o eloquenza?* 48; Pico della Mirandola, *Opera*, 354.

[49] Breen, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," 400; Barbaro and Pico della Mirandola, *Filosofia o eloquenza?* 56; Pico della Mirandola, *Opera*, 356.

[50] Breen, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," 401; Barbaro and Pico della Mirandola, *Filosofia o eloquenza?* 57; Pico della Mirandola, *Opera*, 357.

[51] Breen, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," 402; Barbaro and Pico della Mirandola, *Filosofia o eloquenza?* 62; Pico della Mirandola, *Opera*, 358. *Filosofia o eloquenza?* and *Opera* have "desipiens" instead of "insipiens," but Breen's reading is more striking. On the whole issue of language and style in Pico, see Francesco Bausi, *Nec rhetor nec philosophus: Fonti, lingua e stile nelle prime opere latine di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1484–87)* (Florence: Olschki, 1996).

reverse the common notion of profound wisdom to be concealed from the eyes of the lay people and portray scholasticism as a rude technique to bar readers from understanding, whereas literary means, as well as understanding of style (in other words, the achievements of humanism), give access to wisdom, as should be. Considering that this letter was written before Pico clashed with the Roman prelates and even before he had been in Paris, it clearly shows a persistent agenda of the philosopher, namely, the quest to ascertain wisdom in written texts that are neither tasteless nor foolish.

Obviously, the best way to ascertain the authority of doctrinal theology is to return to its source, which, in Pico's case, can mean either a careful reading of the Bible or, even better, gaining access to its proper and divine way of speaking, which manifested itself in the book. For the first, Pico produced his own commentary on the Creation in Genesis; for the second, he discovered Cabala. While preparing for the great disputation, Pico hired the Jewish convert Flavius Mithridates (Raimundo Moncada) to translate a corpus of Hebrew wisdom, from which he would distill the Cabalistic parts of his *900 Theses*.[52] Whatever had inspired him to seek help in Jewish mysticism for an understanding of theology, certainly Mithridates confirmed it, for already in 1481 the convert had delivered a sermon in Rome before the pope and the cardinals that insinuated (if not forged) some concordance of pre-Christian Jewish mysteries with Christian mysteries.[53]

In his *Apology*, Pico defends Kabbalah together with magic, because it had been his thesis that both help confirm the divinity of Christ. As to magic, he downgrades it to a mere practical and natural science that does not interfere with revelation. Cabala, however, is no such discipline; it is defined as a second way of divine revelation. Condescending to the censors, he explains "in Parisian style" that, in addition to the written law given to Moses on Mount Sinai, God bestowed on him also "the true interpretation of the law, including all mysteries and secrets, that are

[52] See *The Great Parchment: Flavius Mithridates' Latin Translation, the Hebrew Text, and an English Version*, ed. Giulio Busi et al. (Turin: Aragno, 2004), including "A Historical Note," by Saverio Campanini, 95–101, and also Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). On Pico and Cabala, I am also indebted to Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, who shared with me the chapter on Pico of his forthcoming book on Christian Cabala. Instead of *Kabbala(h)*, I use the spelling *Cabala*, as most scholars do, because it is questionable whether Pico practiced authentic Kabbalah.

[53] See Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, chap. 9, at 106.

hidden under the shell [*sub cortice*] and raw face of the words." That is, Moses received "a literal and a spiritual" law.[54] Since God had forbidden the placement of the spiritual law into writing it was transmitted exclusively orally. Pico adds as a cautionary note that this Hebrew wisdom has nothing to do with the anti-Christian Jewish activities, precisely because it stems from times before Christ.[55] After an extended report of indirect evidences of the existence of such secret doctrine in the (apocryphal) Fourth [Second] Book of Esdras, in St. Paul (Romans 3:2), and in Origen, Pico points out that Cabala is equivalent to the *sensus anagogicus* of traditional biblical exegesis.[56] His defense of Cabala amounts to the claim that all of his Kabbalistic theses practically compel the Jews to assent with the Christians.[57]

It may be the case that Pico was disingenuous here, but certainly he mounted a solid argument by saying that his great project could work towards the conversion of the Jews, and he doubtlessly believed that Cabala gives access to the correct reading of the Bible. He also boasts to be the first in the Latin world to mention Cabala, and I think he gives a hint where he got the idea. In explaining that the Church Fathers had only heard about that old wisdom, yet it was never diffused, he refers to Maimonides ("Rabbi Moyses de Aegypto") who is alleged to have first mentioned it.[58] Pico owned three copies of his *Dux neutrorum* (*Guide to the Perplexed*, a key work of explicit reference to the dialectics of hidden and apparent truth[59]) and repeatedly referred to it in the *900 Theses*.[60] In the context of Cabala, this one is of great importance: "Rabbi Moses the Egyptian . . ., while in the superficial shell of words [*per superficialem verborum corticem*] appears to move with the philosophers, in hidden insights of a profound sense enfolds the mysteries of the Cabala."[61] If Pico had

[54] *Apologia*, 175.
[55] Ibid., 176.
[56] Ibid., 178.
[57] Ibid., 179: "nullum esse scilicet pene articulum, in quo nobiscum Iudaei per Cabalistarum authoritatem sentire non cogantur."
[58] Ibid., 180. On the other hand, Pico does not mention a particular text, and certainly Maimonides was "transformed into a Kabbalist" through Mithridates' translations of Abrahm Abulafia's commentary on Maimonides (Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, 84). Still, Pico may have asked him to do so.
[59] See Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1952), 42–3.
[60] See Pearl Kibre, *The Library of Pico della Mirandola* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 43–4. The theses from Maimonides are 12.1–3, in Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 276, and they deal with his interpretation of Aristotle's Prime Mover.
[61] Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 547 (11>63).

read Maimonides as a sage who conceals and reveals hidden wisdom under the pretext of philosophy – a commonplace regarding sapiential wisdom, which Pico also applies to Aristotle in the same thesis – then he was legitimized to introduce Cabala, as a Jewish tradition, into the canon of those writings that require, and lead to, a hermeneutics beyond scholastic terminology and concepts.

To sum up, the true Cabala was revealed by God to Moses and transmitted from Moses to further wise men by way of succession, so it is properly called "tradition," which is the meaning of the word *Cabala*.[62] Against this true Cabala Pico distinguishes another one, for the term can be used simply to denote any secret and occult knowledge. The reason for the synonym is that, of course, every sapiential practice lives on occult tradition. At this point, Pico refers to a Hebrew tradition of combinatoric art, which is said to be analogous to that of Raymond Lull and, again, to magic.[63] Although these are – as was the claim of the indicted thesis – helpful for understanding Christ as God, they are only in a metaphorical sense (transumptive) to be named Cabala.[64]

The bridge between magical and Cabalistic science is combinatorics, as we gather from the same section of the *Apology*. The outright distinction given there between practical and speculative Cabala has a remarkable outlook in the Cabalistic theses "according to his own view," which – interestingly – remained unchallenged, as did most of the "magic" theses. The first Cabalistic thesis (11>1) says, "Whatever other Cabalists say, in a first division I distinguish the science of Cabala into the science of *sefirot* and *shemot* [names], as it were into practical and speculative science."[65] Whatever the current research on Pico's Cabala, which is still in flux,[66]

[62] *Apologia*, 180.

[63] This entails that Pico did not think of Lull's philosophical theology but only of its quasi-magical applications. By extension of the research of Paola Zambelli, one should look for pseudo-Lullian Cabalistic texts that could have inspired Pico to associate Lullian art with Cabala; see Paola Zambelli, *L'aprendista stregone: Astrologia, cabala e arte lulliana in Pico della Mirandola e seguaci* (Venice: Marsilio, 1995), esp. chap. 2, §1, 55–64: "Il *De auditu kabbalistico* e la tradizione lulliana nel Rinascimento."

[64] *Apologia*, 180–1. Wirszubski discusses the passage on p. 180 – "unam quae dicitur ars combinandi, et est modus quidam . . . sicut apud nos dicitur ars Raymundi, licet forte diverso modo procedant" – in *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter* (p. 260); in the first edition, there was a reference to "hokmat haseruf," a letter-combinatoric of Abulafia. At this point it is interesting to note that Pico keeps Cabala apart from combinatorics and Lull from the Jew; on the other hand, he draws his readers' attention to their similarity.

[65] Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 519.

[66] See the footnotes in Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*; Brian P. Copenhaver, "Number, Shape, and Meaning in Pico's Christian Cabala: The Upright *Tsade*, the Closed *Mem*, and the Gaping Jaws of Azazel," in *Natural Particulars: Nature and the Disciplines in Renaissance Europe*, ed. Anthony Grafton and Nancy Siraisi (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 25–76;

Pico claims an original stance and distinguishes practical from speculative Cabala. Unsurprisingly, the next two theses clarify what he means. Thesis 11>3 teaches, "The science that is the practical part of the Cabala practices all formal metaphysics and inferior theology."[67] To the reader, trained in scholastic terminology, this is a debatable but not outrageous statement. Even though it is not quite clear what "formal" means with reference to metaphysics, "inferior theology" can easily be understood as that part of theology that deals with the conduct of life (equivalent to Part II of Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*). It should also be noted that the question, whether theology is a speculative or practical discipline, was part of any standard textbook. Formal metaphysics, then, might be that part of philosophy that serves as an interface with physics and the philosophy of nature. Evidently, both disciplines as included in practical Cabala need to be referred to speculative Cabala, which is defined in the preceding thesis (11>2):

> Whatever other Cabalists say, I divide the speculative part of the Cabala [the science of names] four ways, corresponding to the four divisions of philosophy that I generally make. The first is what I call the science of the revolution of the alphabet, corresponding to the part of philosophy that I call universal philosophy. The second, third, and fourth constitute the threefold *merkabah* [chariot], corresponding to the three parts of particular philosophy, concerning divine, middle, and sensible natures.[68]

Resisting the temptation to explore what Pico's Cabalist sources actually had said,[69] it is clear that – in open contrast to the explanation of the *Apology* – speculative Cabala does deal with combinatorics. However, it is also transparent that the "revolution of the alphabet" dwells beyond the realm of the science of the divine. Therefore, in an attempt to soothe his critics in the *Apology*, Pico must have meant that kind of combinatoric science that operated similar to natural magic. Here we are offered a new hierarchy of philosophy, composed of (1) Cabala as the speculation of letters and thus universal philosophy (*philosophia catholica*); (2) philosophical theology; (3) philosophy of the median realm, which

and Fabrizio Lelli, "Yohannan Alemanno, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola e la cultura ebraica italiana del XV secolo," in *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Convegno internazionale di studi nel cinquecentesimo anniversario della morte (1494–1994)*, ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini (Florence: Olschki, 1997), 303–25.

[67] Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 521.

[68] Ibid. The additions in brackets are by the translator.

[69] For that, see Copenhaver, "Number, Shape, and Meaning," and Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*.

obviously encompasses the intellects; and (4) philosophy of visible nature, or physics.

The first peculiarity of this hierarchy is that theology is overarched by some universal science, whereas traditionally theology completed the system of knowledge that is fairly recognizable in the three lower levels. If we follow this train of thought, it is striking that there should be a realm beyond finite material, spiritual, and divine beings. Scholastic philosophy, however, was always troubled by the problem that God was thought to be as one being (among others) with the exceptional property of pure immateriality, both by way of abstraction and in and of itself. Hence God was thought of as both an extraordinary being and as being itself. From this point of view, Pico seems to suggest that beyond God as part of a hierarchy of beings there is a "catholic" or universal level that transcends God in a way that it makes possible to think of being in most general terms without descending to particular beings. As a solution to the scholastic debate, this level would be identified, much later, as "general metaphysics," which precedes the science of the divine, of intellects, and of the physical world.[70] This hypothesis has some support in Francesco Giorgio Veneto (Zorzi, 1460–1540), who commented on this thesis, trying to coordinate it with the standard system of sciences and with the traditional ways of biblical interpretation. He suggests the following:

> Cabala, when it teaches the literal sense, is termed natural philosophy, when it teaches the moral sense of history, it is termed moral philosophy, but when it applies to Christ it is called allegorical sense, and when it applies history to God it is termed divine philosophy, or anagogical sense. . . . Which I, says [Pico], call catholic, i.e., universal, philosophy. This encompasses knowledge of all abstract quiddities, which is nothing but metaphysics. Thus it corresponds to the alphabetical revolution.[71]

[70] Here I allude to Benedictus Pererius (1535–1610), who in his *De principiis* (1576) suggested a differentiation between general and special metaphysics. See Paul Richard Blum, "Benedictus Pererius: Renaissance Culture at the Origins of Jesuit Science," *Science and Education* 15 (2006): 279–304.

[71] Francesco Giorgio, *Declarationes conclusionum Cabalistarum* (1539), in Chaim Wirszubski, "Francesco Giorgio's Commentary on Giovanni Pico's Kabbalistic Theses," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 37 (1974): 145–56, at 146–7: "Cabala, quando docet sensum literalem dicitur philosophia naturalis; quando docet sensum moralem historiae, dicitur moralis; quando vero applicat ad Christum dicitur sensus allegoricus; quando autem applicat historiam ad Deum dicitur divina philosophia, seu sensus anagogicus. . . . Quam ego, inquit doctor, philosophiam catholicam id est universalem voco. Et haec continet cognitionem omnium quidditatum abstractarum, quae nihil aliud est quam methaphysica. Et ista conrespondet revolutioni alphabeticae."

The virtue of Zorzi's interpretation is that it makes transparent how Pico's system of knowledge is in contrast with scholastic teaching, although he fails to heal the contrast. Zorzi seems to fathom that the highest level must include the level of abstraction that transcends even God. Furthermore, Zorzi's comment renders plausibility to Pico's idea of revolving alphabets as closely connected with biblical hermeneutics, which is justified by Pico's remarks in the *Apology* but raises another question concerning his quasi-hermeneutic approach to reality. Unfortunately, Zorzi does not reconcile theses 11>2 and 11>3, which seem to contradict one another insofar as metaphysics and theology are qualified one time as speculative, another time as practical.

Nevertheless, the bulk of the 72 Cabalistic theses do as promised, since they show that in Cabala all verities of Christianity are present, making ample use of speculations with numbers and letters of the Hebrew alphabet. So, if we trust Pico's command of Cabalistic operations (and that is what the explicit novelty of his method requires), we may also be convinced by his concluding thesis (11>72): "Just as true astrology teaches us to read in the book of God, so the Cabala teaches us to read in the book of the Law."[72] The analogy is that astrology and natural magic contemplate the admirable works of God in an analogous way as Cabala interprets God's revelation in scripture.[73] It is no wonder that Pico next endeavored to offer a new interpretation of God's Creation as told in Genesis.

Pico's commentary on the six days' work has a combinatoric trait from the outset, bearing the title *Heptaplus*, or *Sevenfold*. But he avoids using the term *Cabala*, and still, at the very end of the book, he dares to give "the readers a taste of Mosaic profundity," which he describes exactly in terms of Cabala as the "paradox of the earlier Hebrew learning" that taught how "this arrangement of letters, this text, composes the shell [*corticem*] of a secret kernel of hidden mysteries."[74] Then Pico states that the letters need to be taken apart and reorganized so that they reveal wonderful, most wise mysteries. His sample is the first word of the Bible, *beresit* (in the beginning). After describing a series of dissections and recompositions of its letters, Pico discloses the meaning that was implied in this single word: "The father, in the Son and through the Son, the

[72] Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 553.

[73] See the discussion from the *Oratio* in *Scritti vari*, 154.

[74] Pico della Mirandola, *Heptaplus*, in *On the Dignity of Man, On Being and the One, Heptaplus*, trans. Charles Glenn Wallis, Paul J. W. Miller, and Douglas Carmichael (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 63–174, at 170; *Scritti vari*, 374: "quod vere paradoxon est antiquioris iudaicae disciplinae."

beginning and end or rest, created the head, the fire, and the foundation of the great man with a good pact."[75] He further elaborates the meaning of the "great man" as the relationship of macrocosm to microcosm so that he may conclude this work as it began, namely, as an exposition of the entire Creation in a threefold world to which man, the microcosm, is a fourth world that encompasses and reflects the whole. From there we may infer that the combinatoric and the highest speculative meanings of Cabala coincide. This Cabala does give access to the secret of divine creation through the revolution of the alphabet. Such combinatoric is nothing but a reconfiguration of God's word and work. We may further gather from this conclusion of the entire book that the commentary on Genesis as it stands was intended to prove Pico's point that language, Cabalistic or otherwise, has to transcend the fixed terminology and serves as a cognitive process beyond technical concepts. It is therefore helpful to take a look at the method of sevenfold interpretation of the Creation story.

First Pico establishes a set of three heuristic assumptions: (1) Moses must have spoken adequately and in a learned manner, even though he addressed an uneducated audience; (2) one has "to work out a self-consistent and coherent course of interpretation," avoiding arbitrary shifts of perspective; and (3) Moses cannot have said anything "alien to the nature of things" since the Holy Spirit speaks through him.[76] We may gather from these principles that Pico departs from the customary exegesis through a fourfold doctrine of "senses," because it was this that invited shifts of perspective. At the same time, every sentence of the biblical document has to be taken as spiritually consistent with reality, even though it conveys a hidden content, which, however, must transpire in the literal meaning. Therefore, the nature of things as created by God must necessarily be the very message of the story of Creation. Consequently, a cosmology has to be the basis of the sevenfold interpretation.

Pico's cosmology starts with three layers of being, drawing upon the Platonic tradition: there are three worlds, the transworldly (or angelic or intellectual), the heavenly, and the sublunary worlds. The first is presided over by God, the middle one consists of the celestial spheres, and the third

[75] *Heptaplus*, 172; *Scritti vari*, 378. On Pico's sources, see Fabrizio Lelli, "Pico tra filosofia ebraica e "qabbala," in *Pico, Poliziano e L'Umanesimo di fine Quattrocento*, ed. Paolo Viti (Florence: Olschki, 1994), 193–223, at 214 n. 76.

[76] *Heptaplus*, 73–4; *Scritti vari*, 180–2. I paraphrased in part because the wording is too complex to quote literally.

consists of the inanimate and the living creatures. All these three worlds, however, are one, not only because they all stem from the same principle but, more importantly, because they contain each other mutually; what exists in the lower world also exists in the higher, only in a higher sense. For example, the sun is fire in the heaven, but in the transworld realm it is seraphic intellect.[77] Now, in addition to this literally intricate cosmos, there is a fourth world, which is man, in whom again everything is contained that is in the others.[78] Needless to say, this position resonates with Pico's anthropology in his *Oratio*.[79] Yet, the difference is also notable: what in the *Oratio* sounded like (and perhaps was intended to be) an appeal to man to find, if not determine, his proper place[80] is now an ontological-cosmological hypostasis. This is further illustrated later in *Heptaplus*, when the creation of man to God's "image and likeness" is interpreted by analogy with the founding of a city, in which the founder places an image of himself in the center. Thus man is "a fourth world . . . as he is the bond and union [*complexus et colligatio*] of the three already described." Man's ontological position is therefore analogous to that of God: "God contains all things in Himself as their origin, and man contains all things in himself as their center [*medium*]."[81] As stated initially, the working hypothesis is that if Moses was speaking coherently, he must have paid respect to this cosmological order in narrating the origins of the world, and accordingly the fourfold world must be the clue to reading that narration, which is "the exact image of the world."[82]

Thus we are confronted with a complex of three layers of hermeneutics: the exegesis of the word of God, the exegesis of the Creation, and anthropology as an exegetical challenge. According to the three established principles, Moses's report must be of such language as to be consistent with the order of the cosmos and lead his readers to a unified understanding. This necessitates a fourfold exegesis of the Bible in which every single item is related to each of the four worlds – to the angelic or

[77] See *Heptaplus*, 77; *Scritti vari*, 184–90; especially 188: "Verum quae in mundo sunt inferiori, in superioribus sunt, sed meliore nota."

[78] See *Heptaplus*, 79; *Scritti vari*, 192.

[79] *Scritti vari*, 106. On the theological and historical implications, see M. V. Dougherty, "Two Possible Sources for Pico's *Oratio*," *Vivarium* 40 (2002): 219–41.

[80] For a standard interpretation in this sense, see Walter Andreas Euler, *"Pia philosophia" et "docta religio": Theologie und Religion bei Marsilio Ficino und Giovanni Pico della Mirandola* (Munich: Fink, 1998), 101–12.

[81] *Heptaplus*, Exposition 5, chap. 6, 134–5; *Scritti vari*, 300–2.

[82] *Heptaplus*, 79; *Scritti vari*, 192–4.

invisible, the celestial, the sublunary and corruptible worlds and to the nature of man. That is to say, whatever is said about one of the worlds has immediate implications for the other three, so that they illuminate each other mutually, always on the basis of the narration about the Creation. Even though this seems to be evident by now, in order to achieve this hermeneutical aim Pico postulates three more levels of interpretation, thus completing the sevenfold exegesis. The fifth layer exacts an interpretation of the four worlds as separately represented in the parts of the Creation story. But since these worlds are not truly separate, here we observe a "discordant concord" like in a chain. This linkage between the worlds must have guided Moses; therefore, in a sixth exegesis Pico proposes fifteen ways in which things can be interrelated. The seventh exegesis will be the completion of all in the same way as God completed the Creation with the Sabbath, which will treat felicity in the return of all to God through Christ.[83] Without going into details of this commentary on Genesis, three aspects should be mentioned. First, Pico understands creation and interpretation as a complex operation of configuration and combination in a sense very close to how he had described "true Cabala."[84] Second, the *Heptaplus* explores, indeed, the "divine, middle, and sensible natures" of speculative Cabala. Third, the Roman theologians once more took offense and again Lorenzo de' Medici had to intervene in his favor, stressing that Pico was leading a saintly life. He angrily surmised that even if Pico would recite the *Credo*, his enemies would take it for heresy.[85]

The audacity and resolve with which Pico established his method of biblical reading does not mean he dismissed once and for all traditional exegesis, and consequently it confirms his theological agenda. Around the same time as he was working on his *Heptaplus*, he also endeavored to interpret the entire Bible, in part supported by Mithridates and Johanan Alemanno and using the Hebrew sources afforded by them.[86] He also

[83] See *Heptaplus*, 80–1; *Scritti vari*, 194–6.

[84] Di Napoli is eager to absolve the *Heptaplus* from Cabalistic interests (*Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, 284–5), whereas Garin maintains that Pico's interest in Cabala remained unchanged until his death (*Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Vita e dottrina* [Florence: Le Monnier, 1937], 43–4).

[85] Letter to Giovanni Lanfredini, October 1489, in Lorenzo de' Medici, *Scritti scelti*, ed. Emilio Bibi (Turin: UTET, 1965), 665–6.

[86] See Gianfrancesco Pico, *Vita*, in Pico della Mirandola, *Opera*, fol. *4v; Chaim Wirszubski, "Giovanni Pico's Book of Job," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 32 (1969): 171–99. On Alemanno's influence on Pico's reading of the Song of Songs, see Wirszubski,

completed a series of commentaries on Psalms, in which he applied the traditional scheme of the *sensus litteralis, moralis, allegoricus*, and *anagogicus*.[87] According to that scheme, the seventh exegesis in *Heptaplus* is exactly an equivalent to the anagogical reading of the Bible, crowned by the quoted specimen of anagogically applied Cabala. Bearing in mind the anthropological and theological outlook of Pico's encounter with Genesis, it comes as no surprise that his last completed work, *De ente et uno*, closes with a similar message that exhorts readers to unify cognition and life toward God: "If these three, one, true, and good, follow by perpetual connection, it follows that when we are not these three, we absolutely are not, even though we may appear to be; and although we may be thought to live, yet we would be ever dying rather than living." Ironically, the final clause is a quotation from Seneca.[88] The intention, however, is unmistakable, for it maintains that humans should realize the convergence of the transcendentals (being, one, true, good) – that is, the principles of cognition and the highest attributes of God – in their life by way of returning to God in whom these transcendentals are actually identical. On the surface, this booklet was presented as a polemical correction of Marsilio Ficino's Platonism. But it also defends the same view of God and his engagement in creatures as seven times explained in *Heptaplus*, an engagement that piety is to emulate; God's attributes are one in God "through simple, highest, ineffable, originative unity," and consequently they are "above all things and outside all things, yet in such a way that not only are they very profound in all things, but are more one with all things than they are with themselves."[89] Pico denied the Neoplatonist doctrine that the One is separate from Being. As shown in the fifth exegesis, he postulates that – even though the levels of being are in themselves separate – they had no anagogical force if they were not at the same time "chained" together in a "discordant concord." On

Pico della Mirandola's Encounter, 256ff., and Sears Jayne in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Commentary on a Canzone of Benivieni*, trans. Sears Jayne (New York: Lang, 1984), 219 n. 3, who refers to Arthur Lesley's edition of Alemanno's commentary on the Song of Songs (Ph.D. diss., University of California–Berkeley, 1976); Fabrizio Lelli, "Un collaboratore ebreo di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Yohanan Alemanno," *Vivens homo* 5 (1994): 401–30; and Lelli, "Yohannan Alemanno, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola."

[87] Ioannis Pici Mirandulae, *Expositiones in Psalmos*, ed. Antonino Raspanti (Florence: Olschki, 1997). See 38–44 for a discussion of Pico's method.

[88] Seneca *Epist.* 1.2, 24.20. See Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Über das Seiende und das Eine: De ente et uno*, ed. Paul Richard Blum et al. (Hamburg: Meiner, 2006), nn. 53, 105.

[89] *Heptaplus* 51–2; *Scritti vari*, 418.

the other hand, given the weakness of human understanding that Pico had explored in his struggle with scholasticism, the identity of the levels of being or of the transcendentals is not a fact but a spiritual challenge. Thus Pico continues to hold, what one Cabalistic thesis had taught: all sin comes from the tree of creation.

4

Pico della Mirandola's Philosophy of Religion

Michael Sudduth

Philosophy seeks the truth, theology finds it, and religion possesses it.[1]

In a very broad sense, philosophy may be understood as a habit of rational reflection on perspective, a process of inquiry about "viewpoint" in which basic presuppositions are discovered and examined in terms of their meaning, coherence, and justification. Philosophy is just as much about getting clear about things as it is about offering justifications for our most basic intellectual commitments. The former, of course, is a precondition for the latter. For this reason, philosophy is often thought of as the intellectual habit of asking the right sort of questions, making the right sort of conceptual distinctions, and rightly drawing out the important implications of beliefs. Understood thus, philosophy is less a particular discipline and more a way of thinking about particular disciplines. Philosophy takes on many specific forms as basic questions are raised about different domains of intellectual inquiry, such as philosophy of history, philosophy of knowledge, philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, philosophy of law, and – most relevant to the present paper – philosophy of religion.

On the above understanding of philosophy, *philosophy of religion* refers to a reflective habit of mind directed toward religious or theological beliefs or statements. It includes examining the meaning, coherence, and justification for religious claims as well as tracing out their implications for and relations to other aspects of human life and knowledge. While "philosophy of religion" emerged as a formal academic discipline in the nineteenth century, the spirit and impulse of philosophy of religion – as broadly defined here – has a considerably older and more diverse pedigree. For example, it has been an important part of the world's

[1] Pico della Mirandola, *Opera omnia* (Turin: Bottega D'Erasmo, 1971), 359.

religious traditions, as evidenced by the philosophical work of Shankara (Hinduism), Asvaghosa (Buddhism), Maimonides (Judaism), Avicenna (Islam), and Augustine and Aquinas (Christianity). These thinkers also demonstrate that, while philosophy of religion is often associated with a religiously disinterested or neutral reflective analysis of religion, such an approach is not essential to the nature of philosophical thinking about religion. Some of its most passionate representatives have been devoted adherents of particular religious traditions.

The focus of the present paper is the philosophy of religion of the Renaissance thinker Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94).[2] Pico is perhaps most widely known for his work *Oratio de dignitate hominis* (*On the Dignity of Man*), which, though written in 1486, was published posthumously. The work is usually regarded as a celebration of the humanist values of freedom and reason. Paul Miller has spoken of Pico's intellectual contributions as disclosing through one individual "the spirit of the Italian Renaissance."[3] Pico's philosophical contributions, however, are situated in and inseparably connected to his own Christian religious or theological framework. His "new philosophy" (*philosophia nova*) must be interpreted in this context. Not surprisingly, some of Pico's most important contributions fall within the domain of the philosophy of religion.

In this paper I survey some of Pico's more important contributions to philosophical reflection on religious belief. Although the Renaissance is often depicted as involving a break from the theological worldview of the medieval tradition, Pico's thought is as much an extension and development of this tradition as it is a departure from it. These continuities and discontinuities play a crucial role in defining Pico's work within the conceptual territory of the philosophy of religion. I begin with Pico's view on the relationship between philosophy and theology and move on to consider the religious implications and presuppositions of his syncretistic

[2] My introductory comments on the nature of philosophy of religion (as I am conceiving this project) were designed in part to circumvent the potential criticism that to speak of Pico's "philosophy of religion" is highly anachronistic. However, if my initial comments are insufficient to alleviate such worries, the reader may parse the paper topic as Pico's "philosophical theology." My main interest here is Pico's rational reflection on religious belief and the relation of this activity to Pico's broader philosophical viewpoint.

[3] Paul Miller, "Introduction," in Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), vii. Quotations from the *Oratio* below are taken from this edition, which also includes Pico's works *De ente et uno* (*On Being and the One*) and *Heptaplus*, from which I also quote.

vision. The central point of the paper emerges here. Although Pico's syncretistic methodology played an important role in his rational reflection on religious and Christian belief, ultimately this philosophical methodology presupposes Pico's deeper religious commitments. In this way, the philosophical methodology that shapes reflective inquiry into religious belief has from the start been shaped to a significant degree by initial religious commitments.

Pico on the Relation between Philosophy and Theology

To start filling out Pico's central insights in the philosophy of religion, we can begin by considering his view on the relationship between philosophy and theology or sacred doctrine. Pico addresses this topic in the first part of his famous *Oratio*. While commonly regarded as an attempt to celebrate the dignity of man, Pico's *Oratio* is really an exercise in praise of philosophy. Although Pico began the work by affirming that freedom constitutes the greatness of the human person,[4] this was in fact a preamble to his extended defense of philosophy in the first part of the *Oratio*. Of course, as a whole the *Oratio* was intended as a methodological and justificatory preface to Pico's primary systematic project, a statement of 900 theses that Pico hoped would represent a synthesis of the diverse religious and philosophical viewpoints of civilization.[5] His defense of philosophy in this context importantly illuminates its relation to theology.

Pico argues at length that there is universal testimony to the value of the study of philosophy. Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and ancient Greek religion all affirm the advantages and dignity of philosophy, as do the ancient Greek philosophers. Moral philosophy has the capacity

[4] See below for further discussion on this.

[5] As suggested in a letter shortly before Pico's death, the original or at least intended title of the work was *Oratio ad laudes philosophiae* (*Oration in Praise of Philosophy*). According to S. A. Farmer, *De hominis dignitate* first appeared as the title of the work in a corrupt Strasburg edition of Pico's *Opera* (dated 1504), edited by Jacob Wimpheling and Hieronymus Emser. The absence of Pico's 900 hundred theses from this and other earlier versions of Pico's *Opera* played an important role in decontextualizing the *Oratio* and contributing to its appearance as a purely humanist document of the period. See S. A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486): The Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems* (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998), 18–19 n. 50. All references below to Pico's *900 Theses* will refer to the edition found in Farmer's *Syncretism in the West*.

to liberate us from earthly attachments and desires. Dialectic helps us avoid being ensnared by fallacious reasoning. Natural philosophy gives us knowledge of self and the world. Whereas the first two modes of philosophical inquiry purge error from us, the third positively illuminates the mind with truth. Philosophy thus has the power to cure our vices and ignorance. Nonetheless, our ultimate felicity only comes through "the knowledge of divine things" and "theological piety and the most sacred worship of God."[6] Philosophy is thus a preparation for the "vision of divine things by the light of theology."[7] To borrow Pico's use of the biblical imagery of Jacob's ladder, through philosophy we climb the rungs of the ladder in the ascent to God. Pico saw philosophy as a necessary but insufficient element in the evolutionary human journey back to God, the source, support, and end of all things. Pico wrote:

> Natural philosophy, therefore, cannot assure us a true and unshakable peace. To bestow such peace is rather the privilege and office of the queen of the sciences, most holy theology. Natural philosophy will at best point out the way to theology and even accompany us along the path, while theology, seeing us from afar hastening to draw close to her, will call out: "Come unto me you who are spent in labor and I will restore you; come to me and I will give you the peace which the world and nature cannot give."[8]

Pico's view of philosophy is thus governed by a conception of the human person according to which we are created for an end that surpasses the natural order of things. Philosophy, necessary as it may be, can only take us so far. The point is emphasized in the seventh exposition of Pico's *Heptaplus* (1489). "Felicity," Pico says, "I define as the return of each thing to its beginning . . . the end of all things is the same as the beginning of all: one God, omnipotent, and blessed."[9] Since all things have God within them in some way, they are capable of finding a felicity through the perfection of their own natures.

Philosophy is thus capable of producing a natural felicity when it is directed toward finding God within finite, conditioned reality, within the natural order of things. Pico explains,

> Since each nature has God within it in some way, since it has as much of God as it has goodness (and all things which God made are good), it remains for it, when it has perfected its own nature in all parts and has attained its

[6] Pico, *Oratio*, 9, 16.
[7] Pico, *Oratio*, 13.
[8] Pico, *Oratio*, 11.
[9] Pico, *Heptaplus*, seventh exposition, proem, 148.

> potential, to attain God also within itself; and if the attainment of God is felicity, as we have shown, it is in some way happy in itself. This is the natural felicity, of which more or less is allotted to different things according to their natures.[10]

This natural felicity, however, is only a "shadow of felicity," just as the human person is itself only a shadow of the divine. There is a felicity that is found in God himself, but it transcends the natural order and thus cannot be achieved by any created thing relying on its own strength. It requires the influence of divine grace, which Pico speaks of in Biblical terms as "being led by the Spirit of God."[11] While philosophy may guide us to natural felicity, it is *religion* that "urges, directs, and impels"[12] us toward this supernatural felicity. Philosophy is therefore perfected through religion. Moreover, as Pico sees it, religion involves divine revelation, that is, God's own self-disclosure of himself. Since it is theology that presents this revelation, philosophy can only be a preparation for "a vision of divine things by means of the light of theology."[13] Thus, everything that perfects its nature through attaining its beginning through nature attains its beginning in an imperfect way. Only by transcending the natural order and finding God in himself is any finite thing capable of attaining its beginning in a perfect way. But this is only possible through divine grace, and grace only comes through religion, with its divine revelation. So humans reach ultimate felicity only through the truth that is given in the sacred science of theology.

There are of course clear continuities with the medieval tradition in Pico's dichotomy of nature and grace and his view of philosophy as the handmaiden of theology. It is worth emphasizing here, however, that it is theology that informs Pico's larger view of the human person and his account of the value of philosophy. That the human person's end is supernatural is not a truth derived from philosophy but an implication of Pico's theological beliefs. Consequently, his view of the value and place of philosophy in relation to theology is ultimately based on his fundamental commitment to Christian supernaturalism. I believe this shows an important continuity between Pico and his medieval predecessors, who undertook philosophical inquiry in the larger context of their religious beliefs. Pico does not pretend to stand outside the realm of faith and examine

[10] Pico, *Heptaplus*, seventh exposition, proem, 148.
[11] Romans 8:14.
[12] Pico, *Heptaplus*, 153.
[13] Pico, *Oratio*, 13.

religious belief from a purported neutral perspective. He is a thinker who approaches rational reflection on theological claims within the context of his faith, specifically the Catholic faith, as it existed in fifteenth-century Europe. In step with many of his medieval predecessors, Pico saw human reason as an instrument that is capable of clarifying, developing, and defending the truths articulated by the Catholic faith.[14] Philosophy *seeks* a certain truth already *possessed* by theology and existentially embraced in the religious life. As a consequence, while philosophy informs Pico's rational reflection on religious belief, particular religious commitments inform his understanding of philosophy.

Pico's Syncretistic Approach

One of the more frequently commented-on aspects of Pico's thought has been his so-called "syncretistic method." In reading through Pico's works, one is struck by the overarching theme of achieving a synthesis of diverse religious and philosophical viewpoints. This is particularly true regarding his reflections on religious belief, where constructive synthesis of diverse viewpoints plays an important role in his reflections on God and creation as well as his defense of Christian belief. The following serve as some important illustrations of Pico's syncretistic methodology, which are also relevant to his rational reflections on religious belief.

Pico was convinced that the theologically directed conception of philosophy articulated in the *Oratio* is a truth articulated in the world's diverse religious and philosophical traditions. For example, Pico sees it symbolically revealed through the Mosaic account of the Tabernacle in the wilderness and the various laws governing the worship of God at the Tabernacle. As Pico sees it, the account implies an approach to God that comes though stages of purification and priestly service, but this corresponds to the progression from philosophy (moral, dialectic, and natural) to the knowledge of divine things in which the soul is increasingly purified and illuminated.[15] The Delphic precepts among the Greeks (moderation, know thyself, and know God) also imply this same progression. The Chaldaeans have a similar understanding, for their prophet Zoroaster

[14] This point has been underscored by Avery Dulles in his *Princeps Concordiae: Pico della Mirandola and the Scholastic Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941), 144–5.

[15] As Pico says, "Moses gives us these distinct commands, and in giving them he advises us, arouses us, urges us to make ready our way through philosophy to future celestial glory, while we can" (*Oratio*, 13).

speaks of the soul growing wings to take flight into the heavens after the wings have been moistened with waters from the four corners of the world. Pico interprets this as expressing through figurative language the necessity of the liberal arts for preparing the soul for its return to God.[16]

In the *Heptaplus* (1489), Pico presented a systematic exposition of the Mosaic account of creation in the book of Genesis. Relying on various conventions of allegorical interpretation, including insights from Cabalistic Judaism, Pico attempts to reconcile the Mosaic account of creation and pagan views on the origin of the world as presented in sources as diverse as Plato's *Timaeus* and Zoroastrianism. It is worth noting that Pico goes as far as to see a sanction for his own Neoplatonist emanationist scheme in Moses. "He [Moses] buried the treasures of all true philosophy as in a field" and "philosophizes on the emanation of all things from God."[17] Pico, however, is just as keen on arguing for the harmony of Judaism and Christianity. While the Mosaic account of creation is a truth revealed by God in the Hebrew scriptures, Pico argues that Moses's writings contain hidden references to the advent of Christ, the increase of the church, and the calling of the Gentiles.[18] For example, God's resting after the work of creation symbolizes the spiritual rest of people through Christ the mediator, and the doctrine of the Trinity is secretly expressed by the three forms of unity of things in creation articulated in the opening chapter of Genesis.[19] Once again, utilizing a rigorous method of allegorical interpretation, Pico argues that Moses spoke of the truths that would be more explicitly asserted in the Christian dispensation. Hence, Moses spoke not only of man's supernatural end but also of the Christian revelation.

In his *De ente et uno* (1491), the reconciliation of Aristotelianism and Platonism proves essential to Pico's reflections on the nature of God, specifically his unpacking the wholly transcendent and *sui generis* nature of God as the pure, unlimited act of existence. Pico sets out to reconcile the Aristotelian claim that the One and Being are the same and the Platonist contention that the One is prior to Being. Pico explains that the

[16] I have already noted above that the *Oratio* was contextually a preamble to Pico's *900 Theses*. Inasmuch as his defense of philosophy in the *Oratio* was carried out with support from diverse religious and philosophical traditions, the preamble to the *900 Theses* confers a kind of universal sanction to the syncretistic vision he will develop systematically by way of his collection of theses.

[17] Pico, *Heptaplus*, first proem, 71.

[18] Pico, *Heptaplus*, second proem, 81.

[19] See the second proem (80–1, 84) and the seventh exposition (147–69) of the *Heptaplus* for Pico's account of the Gospel message contained secretly in Moses's writings, and the sixth exposition, proem (139), for his account of the Trinity in creation.

term *being* can be taken in two senses. According to the first, *being* signifies "all that which is outside nothing." That which is nonbeing is nothing. According to the second, *being* signifies that which participates in existence (*esse*). Pico argues that when Aristotle identified Being and the One, he assumed Being in the former sense. He did not intend to assert that the One participates in Being, as, for example, luminosity participates in light. Hence, Aristotle's view is compatible with the view advocated among Platonists. Pico explains, "For God, who is the plentitude of all existence, is of this nature. He alone is of himself, and from him alone, with no interposing medium, all things proceed to existence."[20] Pico's view here reproduces the Thomistic position that God is *ipsum esse*, the act of existence of itself.[21]

Most important, though, was Pico's proposal, at age 23, to dispute his 900 theses on philosophy and theology in Rome.[22] His goal was to assemble representatives of the diverse schools of thought relevant to his 900 theses in an extended public disputation. Pico had intended to open the debate with a formal oration that would underscore the importance of locating common ground in diverse viewpoints, not only within the Catholic faith but common ground between Christian and non-Christian thought. The debate never materialized, being suspended by Pope Innocent VIII, whose suspicions about Pico's orthodoxy had been sufficiently aroused. As noted above, far from being a celebration of the spirit of Renaissance humanism, the *Oratio* was a propaedeutic to Pico's main syncretistic project. In these theses, we find a broad range of mini-syncretistic projects systematically brought together, from the reconciliation of Plato and Aristotle to the harmony of Hebrew scripture and the Christian revelation. Architecturally, Pico's theses divide into 400 quasi-historical theses and 500 theses according to his own opinion. It is in this second half of the work that we find Pico attempting to resolve various conflicts in scholastic theology, launching criticisms of Thomas Aquinas, and concluding with the use of Cabalistic insights to confirm truths of the Christian religion.

As suggested in several of the illustrations above, to actualize his syncretistic vision, it was necessary for Pico to affirm (1) a level of meaning beneath the surface of the texts whose ideas he tried to reconcile and unify and (2) an interpretive method for deriving these hidden truths from the

[20] Pico, *On Being and the One*, 44.

[21] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 4, a. 2, corp.

[22] For an account of the history of Pico's proposed Roman disputation, see Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, chap. 1.

texts. Pico's syncretistic project relies heavily on the concept of "mystery." The truth is concealed in various ways and must be recovered by means of principles of allegorical interpretation. Pico emphasizes this throughout the *Heptaplus* in his effort to harmonize both the Mosaic account of creation and the philosophy of Plato's *Timaeus* as well as to derive Christian truths from the Hebrew scriptures. "Moses had to speak with a veiled face, lest those whom he was undertaking to enlighten be blinded by so much light."[23] Of course, it is not just Moses but all ancient writers who speak the truth in a mystery. "The custom of the ancients," he says, was to write "occultly and figuratively."[24] Even the philosophers do this: "Plato himself concealed his doctrines beneath coverings of allegory, veils of myth, mathematical images, and unintelligible signs of fugitive reasoning."[25] This principle of truth concealment is crucial to Pico's syncretistic approach, for the surface meaning of the texts Pico handles either underdetermines the truths he wishes to deduce or presents otherwise prima facie irreconcilable inconsistencies.

Pico is explicit that the basis for his method of allegorical interpretation is a metaphysical principle of the mutual containment of all levels of reality: "whatever is in any of the worlds is contained in each."[26] Pico distinguished between the ultramundane, celestial, and sublunary worlds. The last world is the one inhabited by all living things on earth. The first is the angelic realm (as described by theologians) or the intelligible realm (as described by Platonists). The celestial world is the realm above the earth, embracing the stars and planets, but below the ultramundane world. To these three worlds, Pico adds a fourth: the human person. According to Pico, "Bound by chains of concord, all these worlds exchange natures as well as names with mutual liberality. From this principle . . . flows the science of all allegorical interpretation."[27] It is because all things are contained in each other that discourse about any one level of reality is bound to involve reference to other levels of reality. But this can only be accomplished by using language in such a way that words simultaneously have different meanings. Consequently, texts will always have a literal and figurative meaning. The method of allegorical interpretation will bring out the multiplicity of truths expressed in this way.

[23] Pico, *Heptaplus*, second exposition, proem, 94.
[24] Pico, *Heptaplus*, second exposition, proem, 94.
[25] Pico, *Heptaplus*, first proem, 69.
[26] Pico, *Heptaplus*, second proem, 80.
[27] Pico, *Heptaplus*, second proem, 78–9.

The Religious Contours of Pico's Syncretistic Method

While Pico utilizes his syncretistic method to derive philosophically robust conclusions about religion in general and the Christian religion in particular, the justification for this method seems to depend on some of Pico's basic religious beliefs. If the dependency is not just apparent, the method he utilized in developing a philosophy of religion was inspired, at least in part, by his own religious convictions. A more detailed examination of Pico's justification of the syncretistic approach will bring this into better resolution.

A. The Defense of Philosophy and Human Freedom

As explained above, Pico's defense of philosophy (as a preamble to his syncretistic project) rests firmly on religious, specifically Christian, presuppositions. He clearly assumes Christian supernaturalism throughout, though he attempts, through the use of allegorical interpretation, to tease out the preparatory role of philosophy in the soul's journey back to God from non-Christian religious and philosophical traditions. The same must be said concerning Pico's opening discussion of freedom, so frequently transformed (incorrectly, I think) into the main theme of the *Oratio*.

Pico begins the *Oratio* with an inquiry into the grounds of the greatness of the human person. As Pico explains, while several of the reasons adduced for the wonderful nature of the human person are valid, the best reason is that which sets the human person completely apart from the rest of created things. According to Pico, this must be the *freedom* of the human person to fashion and transform himself into that which he is not. The greatness of the human person lies not in a fixed essence or nature that places the human person above the rest of the created order but in the possibilities open to the human person. The medieval background to Pico's proposal here is important. In medieval metaphysics, all created things have a fixed ontological status in the universe. Created beings form a hierarchy (the so-called "Great Chain of Being"), ascending from a lower to a higher status based on their ontological composition – broadly their composition of matter and spirit.[28] This chain of created being originates from uncreated being, God. In this hierarchical conception of the universe, the human person is in a fixed position between the angelic

[28] See Edward P. Mahoney, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Origen on Humans, Choice, and Hierarchy," *Vivens homo* 5 (1994): 359–76, at 360–1, 373–6.

and animal worlds. The human person was created "a little lower than the angels," to quote the Psalmist. While retaining much of this general medieval metaphysics, Pico's departs from it in a crucial respect. The ontological status of the human person is not fixed. The essence of the human person (if we can use the term "essence") is freedom. Unlike the rest of creation, the human person has the capacity to become what he or she chooses to become. As Pico explains, "Oh great and wonderful happiness of man! It is given him to have that which he chooses and to be that which he wills. . . . At man's birth, the Father placed in him every sort of seed and sprouts of every kind of life."[29] Pico depicts God as speaking to Adam as follows:

> A limited nature in other creatures is confined within the laws written down by Us. In conformity with thy free judgment, in whose hands I have placed thee, thou art confined by no bounds; and thou wilt fix limits of nature for thyself. I have placed thee at the center of the world, that from there thou mayest more conveniently look around and see whatsoever is in the world. Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have We made thee. Thou, like a judge appointed for being honorable, art the molder and maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer. Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes. Thou canst again grow upward from thy soul's reason into higher natures which are divine.[30]

The human person is thus a "chameleon," having a nature capable of transforming itself into lower or higher forms in the Great Chain of Being.

Pico's insistence on the freedom of the human person to fashion himself for better or worse was by no means a novel suggestion when Pico proposed it. The idea was common among Neoplatonists of the day.[31] Indeed, Pico spends considerable time arguing that the Hebrews, Greeks, Chaldeans, and Arabs accepted this idea. Not surprisingly, the idea is explicitly or implicitly found within several of the world's religious and philosophical traditions. So Pico does not consider himself to be offering

[29] Pico, *Oratio*, 5.

[30] Pico, *Oratio*, 4–5.

[31] The idea had been emphasized in the metaphysics of the Platonist Academy at Florence where Pico spent time studying. Neoplatonists such as Marsilio Ficino placed the "human soul" in the middle of the Great Chain of Being: Body → Quality → Soul → Angel → God. Being located in the middle, the human person was capable of descending to lower forms or ascending to higher forms depending on the exercise of his free will.

a new idea as much as newly presenting an old idea.[32] He is bringing clarity to a point of importance already at least implicitly recognized by people of different cultures and religious creeds.

The significance, however, of Pico's opening "freedom" motif is derived from its immediate context. Human freedom, though constituting the greatness of the human person, does not by itself produce felicity, natural or supernatural. It is for this reason that Pico follows up his comments on freedom with his defense of philosophy. Freedom is a power, a power that can be used to lower the human person to the level of a brute or to raise him to the level of angels or the divine nature. Something must direct our choices if we are to choose well, and this must be knowledge. But as already noted, while the knowledge that comes through philosophy can prepare the soul to transcend itself, we reach our ultimate felicity only through the knowledge of God that comes through theology. So Pico's notion of freedom is situated within a theological teleology. The purpose of this freedom is to allow the human person to ascend to a higher place, ultimately to become one with God the creator, where this is mediated by the knowledge given by theology as well as the preparatory purification and knowledge given by philosophy. Thus, Pico's account of freedom is shaped by his theological convictions.

B. Many Perspectives in Search of One Truth

Pico's philosophy of the human person, specifically his notion of freedom, connects to his syncretistic approach in an interesting way that further illuminates his own theological presuppositions. The above ontology of the human person implies not only the freedom to pursue truth and engage in rational inquiry but also the potential for diverse viewpoints. While our choices presuppose knowledge, knowledge also presupposes choices. The human person is capable, by virtue of his freedom, of viewing the world from different perspectives.[33] Freedom of thought implies what we might call "perspectival diversity." The ontology of the human person thus has epistemological implications. Of course, for Pico, multiplicity is more broadly grounded in the very nature of things. The universe is an

[32] For a discussion of the patristic and medieval background of this notion, see Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 2:506–7.

[33] I do not mean to suggest any direct voluntary control over our perspective. Rather, our choices *indirectly* influence, or shape in the long run, the view of the world we naturally acquire.

emanation of the One, God, through a succession of intermediaries. Perspectival multiplicity is thus grounded in both human freedom and the larger ontological structure of things. But behind it all is the perspective of the One.

It is the empirical fact of perspectival diversity that presents the challenge of finding unity in diversity. For Pico, although there is a multiplicity of perspectives, truth is ultimately one. This of course reflects the deeper unity of things, as all multiplicity has originated from the One. In Pico's Neoplatonist cosmological scheme, all things ultimately return to the One. It is not surprising, then, to find Pico placing emphasis on the epistemological plane; we must work through the multiplicity of perspectives to locate a deeper unity of perspective and ultimately the one truth. The epistemological trajectory of human thought thus mirrors the actual ontological evolution of the universe, with the many arising from the One and returning again to the One. The truth is one and it is "out there," but, given the diversity of perspectives, we must work to find it. Pico explains:

> Further, if there is a school which attacks truer doctrines and ridicules with calumny the good causes of thought, it strengthens rather than weakens truth, and as by motion it excites the flame rather than extinguishing it. Moved by this reasoning, I have wished to bring into view the things taught not merely according to one doctrine (as some would desire), but things taught according to every sort of doctrine, that by this comparison of very many sects and by the discussion of manifold philosophy, that radiance of truth which Plato mentions in his *Letters* might shine more clearly upon our minds, like the sun rising from the deep.[34]

The process of discovery, therefore, requires the dialectical engagement of diverse perspectives.

C. Religious Contours

Why is it important to find the one truth? It is bound up in Pico's understanding that our ultimate felicity depends on the knowledge of God, the knowledge of the One, which, as I argued above, may be traced to his Christian supernaturalism. The happiness of human beings must transcend the natural order of things because a supernatural God is the creator and humans were created for union with this God. Philosophically, happiness, as Pico stated in his *De ente et uno*, is "the return to the Origin."

[34] Pico, *Oratio*, 23.

This return to the Origin is a return to the One. Hence, all perspectives must be traced to their single origin. But as in all Christianized forms of Platonism, this ontology is baptized in a religious vision, the vision of human redemption. Pico's syncretistic project is thus intimately tied to a redemptive or soteriological vision that is supplied by his Christian presuppositions. Seeing the unity of things brings us not only knowledge of reality but knowledge of God.

The religious contours of Pico's syncretistic method may be seen from another angle. Pico's syncretism presupposes perspectival diversity and the rational accessibility of the one truth contained in all. Perspectival diversity by itself can easily lead to skepticism, as demonstrated by Renaissance skepticism and early modern thinkers like Michel de Montaigne (1533–92). The rational possibility of synthesis of viewpoint arises from the fact of perspectival pluralism and the philosophical assumption that the universe (literally, one truth) is rationally penetrable. It is Pico's notion that we can find common ground in diverse viewpoints, and the correlated notion that truth is discovered by a clash of viewpoints allows him to take the possibility of Renaissance skepticism to a different conclusion. So there is optimism about the ability of human reason to know that the world has an underlying unity and that we can discover it. This optimism I would suggest is rooted in Pico's Christian theism. The universe is rational because a rational God has created it. It is rationally penetrable to humans because it has been created for them and is – like the human person – an icon of their maker.

Syncretism and the Problem of Religious Pluralism

In this final section, I want to draw a contrast between the kind of syncretism we find in Pico and the sort that is exhibited in contemporary philosophy of religion. I think this contrast provides a final, compelling vision of the extent to which Pico's syncretism is shaped by prior theological commitments, specifically his Christian religious commitments.

A. Syncretism and Contemporary Philosophy of Religion

One of the apparent virtues of syncretism is that it would seem to address one of the basic problems encountered in philosophy of religion, namely, the so-called "problem of religious diversity." Simply stated, if there is one God, why are there so many different religious traditions, many of which teach prima facie incompatible doctrines about the divine and human salvation? The syncretist has a straightforward answer. Religious

diversity is not the fundamental fact. The fundamental fact is a single truth (or system of truths) *expressed* through multiple human ideas and language forms.[35] From here we find many of the "comparative religion" projects that have often dominated late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century philosophy of religion. Such projects are typically aimed at carving through the doctrinal distinctions among the world's different religious traditions and locating some more fundamental truth held in common between these traditions.

Two examples should suffice. To begin with, Oxford philosophical theologian Keith Ward sees "the discernment of the infinite in and through the finite"[36] (what he calls the "iconic vision") as a basic point of convergence between the traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Reflectively, this takes the form of what Ward calls "dual-aspect theism," the conjunction of two apparently conflicting ideas: God as simultaneously wholly transcendent (and thus unrelated to anything and beyond all human description) and wholly immanent (and thus related to all things and capable of being described). In this way, God is both the inaccessible Divine Infinite Being and the Divine Activity present in and accessible to all finite things. Ward sees this dialectical tension as crucial for instilling the faith and worship acts that define the practical axis of religion.

As a second example, John Hick has argued in several different books for what he calls "religious pluralism." Religious pluralism claims that no religious tradition is superior to any other religious tradition (the egalitarianism principle) and that each of the world's religious traditions provides its own path to and conditions of salvation for its adherents (the equal access principle).[37] Hick's pluralism is based on broadly Kantian themes, principally the distinction between noumena (things in themselves) and phenomena (things as they appear to us). For Hick, religious traditions and their various doctrines represent diverse appearances of the divine. This does not preclude Hick from affirming some sort of ultimate reality behind these various appearances framed through human concepts and

[35] For a syncretist such as Pico, religious diversity is precisely what one would expect, for this is what the world should look like in a universe operating according to Neoplatonist principles. Emanation and freedom together generate perspectival diversity.

[36] Keith Ward, *Concepts of God: Images of the Divine in Five Religious Traditions* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1998), 153.

[37] See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), and Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralist Age*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

in human language: "the noumenal Real is experienced and thought by different human mentalities, forming and formed by different religious traditions, as the range of gods and absolutes within the phenomenology of religion reports."[38] Hence, there is a divine reality, the Real in itself, which stands behind all religious traditions. Hick's religious syncretism involves subtracting all substantive concepts from a tradition's discourse about God, stripping religious traditions down to some mythological, as opposed to literal, truth. So for Hick, traditional Christian ideas such as the doctrine of the incarnation and the correlated belief in the divinity of Christ, as well as Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead, must be deconstructed as metaphors expressing the same truth about the divine found in all religious traditions.

B. Pico's Christosyncretism

It should be apparent that Pico's syncretism looks very different than the syncretism of John Hick and other contemporary philosophers of religion who locate common ground between diverse religious traditions in some abstract form of theism. Pico accepts that there is a natural felicity possible for all people. He also accepts the idea that all religious and philosophical traditions contain truth, even the fundamental truth that is instrumental in humans' achieving their ultimate felicity. But neither of these facts entail that humans can be saved independently of faith in the redemptive work of Christ. Pico explicitly rejects such an idea. The central theme of the seventh exposition of the *Heptaplus* is that ultimate felicity (eternal life) is ratified by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and the efficacy of Christ's redemptive work is transmitted through the sacrament of baptism. Christ is the focal point of a historically situated redemptive plan, explicitly revealed in the Christian revelation. Speaking of the patriarchs who lived before Christ, Pico says, "Then after the ineffable sacrifice performed on the altar of the cross, when Christ had come down to them, he swept them to freedom like the moving power of a whirlwind and carried them up to the level of highest felicity."[39] Indeed, Pico argues that those who have been confronted with the claims of the Christian message about the work of Christ and do not place their faith in him defile their natures and make it impossible even to achieve natural felicity.[40] Pico clearly believes

[38] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 242.
[39] Pico, *Heptaplus*, seventh exposition, proem, 153.
[40] See Pico, *Heptaplus*, 153.

that human redemption supervenes on the death of Christ as an actual historic event. He also accepts traditional Catholic beliefs about Christ's divinity and bodily resurrection. In short, Pico retains the Christocentric theology that is patently rejected by pluralists like John Hick.

Hick contrasts his own pluralist position with what he calls "religious exclusivism" and "religious inclusivism." A religious exclusivist sees his religion as the correct religion and other religions, despite having some religious truth, as not the correct religion. The religious exclusivist privileges his own tradition's account of God and human salvation. Thus a Christian exclusivist maintains that, while other religions might contain divine truths, people are saved only through Christ. The religious inclusivist, in contrast, privileges his own religious tradition but allows the possibility that people outside his religious tradition can experience salvation. The Christian exclusivist and inclusivist both regard the death of Christ as essential to human salvation, but the latter loosens the degree to which a person must be an explicit adherent of the Christian faith to experience the redemptive benefits of Christ's death. Using Hick's distinction, Pico appears to be an exclusivist Christian, which of course would have been the common position of Catholic Christians in the fifteenth century.[41]

To the question of what separates the syncretism of Pico from a pluralistic syncretism of philosophers of religion like Hick, I propose a fairly straightforward answer. Pico takes the Christian faith as his point of reference when it comes to finding truth hidden in diverse religious traditions. In this way, we see how Pico's syncretistic approach is shaped by his distinctly Christian presuppositions. For Pico, the mysteries of Christ and the Christian Church are contained symbolically in the various religious and philosophical traditions. The theism that is contained in the ancient religious thinkers and philosophers is ultimately a Christotheism. Consequently, Pico is not standing outside the Christian faith and looking for a very general truth found in all. His syncretistic project is, for all its Neoplatonist elements, very much Christologically tethered. It is a *Christosyncretism*, because the common truth hidden in various religious

[41] My qualification of Pico's syncretism as Christocentric is an interpretation not inconsonant with the work of other commentators on Pico. Recently Moshe Idel has argued against those who contend that Pico treats Christian, Cabbalistic, and Hermetic views as equal elements within a syncretic project. See Idel, "Kabbalah and Hermeticism in Dame Frances A. Yates's Renaissance," in *Ésotérisme, gnoses et imaginaire symbolique*, ed. Richard Caron et al. (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 71–90, esp. 74–6, 88.

and philosophical viewpoints is essentially Christian truth, or at least points in this direction. It is for this reason that Pico can argue without embarrassment that the truths of non-Christian religious traditions confirm Christian truth in various ways.[42]

John Hick does not and cannot take the Christian faith as his point of reference by virtue of his radical perspectivalist assumptions. Pico accepts the fact of perspectival diversity and even the limits of human language in describing the divine, but he does not infer from this the sort of theological agnosticism and normative religious relativism that infects many post-Kantian philosophers of religion. Hick's philosophical assumptions preclude his regarding Christianity as anything more than one expression of the human response to the Real. Consequently, rather than it being that all religious and philosophical viewpoints contain the mystery of the Christ, there is some non-Christian religious truth expressed in diverse ways, resulting in Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and so on.

This contrast between Pico and Hick is not trivial. It has important implications for how philosophy in general and philosophy of religion in particular are carried out. In Pico's view, philosophy of religion, like philosophy in general, is placed in the service of a particular faith that is nonnegotiable. For Hick, philosophy of religion is placed in the service of all faiths in the effort to find something that is nonnegotiable, however conceptually thin it might be.[43] While Pico seeks a vindication of the Christian faith, Hick seeks a vindication of a fairly abstract and

[42] Consider, for example, Pico's claim that "I come now to those things that I have dug up from the ancient mysteries of the Hebrews and have brought forward in order to confirm the holy and Catholic faith" (*Oratio*, 29; cf. 33). Pico's *900 Theses* end with "seventy-one Cabalistic conclusions according to my own opinion, strongly confirming the Christian religion using the Hebrew wisemen's own principles" (Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 517). See also the entire seventh exposition of the *Heptaplus* for Pico's defense of the Christian faith from the Hebrew scriptures.

[43] My view here argues against those who view Pico's project as an early representative of modern-style syncretic projects. Consider the account of Cesare Vasoli, who writes, "Pico saw himself as searching for the deepest common truth, where *sapientia* and its various temporal manifestations might reside, untroubled by doctrinal squabbles." Vasoli, "The Renaissance Concept of Philosophy," in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Charles Schmitt et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 57–74, at 68. For a critical assessment of works that present Pico as a modern-style syncretist, the account of William G. Craven can be read with profit; see chapter 5 of his *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Symbol of His Age: Modern Interpretations of a Renaissance Philosopher* (Geneva: Libraire Droz, 1981).

truncated form of theism, of which Christianity is just another manifestation. For Hick, traditional Christianity must be deconstructed in terms of non-Christian philosophical assumptions to find the truth. For Pico, other religious traditions must be deconstructed in the light of basic Christian presuppositions about God, the world, and human nature. Put otherwise, Pico is a son of the medieval tradition and Hick is a child of the Enlightenment. While Hick is a philosopher of religion, Pico is a philosopher of the Christian religion.

This is not to say, of course, that Hick's approach to philosophy of religion is not governed by certain religious presuppositions or that Pico's approach is not governed by philosophical presuppositions. It is simply to say that Pico self-consciously appropriated his religious presuppositions as a philosopher, and the combination of his Christian presuppositions and Neoplatonist philosophy produced a particular kind of philosophy of religion. Hick's starting point is quite different, philosophically and religiously, and results in a very different sort of philosophy of religion. This shows that the assessment of any philosophy of religion must always be made in connection with a deeper set of pretheoretical commitments and that a philosopher's ultimate conclusions are, if consistent, ultimately delimited by such commitments.

Concluding Remarks

Pico's syncretistic methodology played a crucial role in shaping his rational reflections on the existence of God, the world, the human person, and the relations between them. While there are various specific points of continuity between Pico's philosophy of religion and the medieval tradition, perhaps the more important general continuity lies in the way in which Pico's reflection on his Christian beliefs, as well as the beliefs of other religious traditions, was informed by his Christian faith, or to be more precise, his Neoplatonist version of the Christian faith. Pico's defense of philosophy, his notion of human freedom, and his broader syncretistic program – all intimately connected – were shaped by his fundamental religious presuppositions, a form of Christian supernaturalism that defined Roman Catholic theology in the fifteenth century. Consequently, while Pico's syncretism gets some important work accomplished in the philosophy of religion, the path eventually leads back to theology and a religious vision. Finally, I argued that Pico's Christian framework sets his syncretistic project distinct from similar projects that have

emerged in twentieth-century philosophy of religion. Pico has an answer to those who try to reconcile the diversity of religious traditions with the existence of one truth and one Supreme Being, but Pico's is a distinctly Christian answer: "Surely if all things agree with the truth, as Aristotle says, all things ought to agree with Christ, who is the truth itself."[44]

[44] Pico, *Heptaplus*, seventh exposition, chap. 5, 165–6.

5

The Birth Day of Venus

Pico as Platonic Exegete in the Commento *and the* Heptaplus

Michael J. B. Allen

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94) was the wunderkind among Italian Renaissance philosophers and a key figure, along with Cusanus, Bessarion, and Ficino, in the revival of Platonic metaphysics, though he was not a devout Neoplatonist like Ficino but rather an Aristotelian by training and in many ways an eclectic by conviction. Nonetheless, he plunged as hardly more than a youth into the works of Plato, Plotinus, Proclus, and other Neoplatonists, notably in the fifteen months or so he spent in Florence from the spring of 1484 to the summer of 1485, where he acquired a rare understanding of the Platonists' methodology, central postulates, and metaphysical distinctions. This Platonic education was succeeded by nine months in Paris (July 1485 to March 1486) and was subsequently harnessed to an encyclopedic, ambitious, essentially Aristotelian plan. This was to gather together an array of Egyptian, Chaldean, Greek, Hebrew (including Cabalistic), patristic, and scholastic (including Arab) propositions rather than arguments or proofs as such – an array which eventually amounted to 900 conclusions, 900 being the numerological symbol of the soul's ecstatic return to itself in philosophical study – and to defend them in Rome. The event would take place early in 1487 in what he called a "council" but which would be in effect a grand Parisian *disputatio*, and it would include, he hoped, the pope, the College of Cardinals, and a number of eminent theologians and philosophers (whose expenses he would cover!). While this breathtaking proposal by a brilliant twenty-three-year-old had a positivistic dimension to it inasmuch as a number of the theses either concerned nature or had implications for any consideration of the natural world, and a

few even invoked mathematical and numerological ideas, yet it was at heart a hermeneutic enterprise exploring the necessity and the limits of Platonic interpretation – interpretation not so much of a scheme or a set of propositions as of any philosophical or mythological proposition whatsoever regardless of its provenance or original argumentative context.

The *Conclusiones* were published in Rome on December 7, 1486, notices were posted in all the universities in Italy, and Pico set about preparing an introductory Latin *Oration*, with its celebrated account of God's addressing the protoplastic Adam. Controversy immediately erupted, and in January Pope Innocent VIII appointed a commission to examine the conclusions. In early March the commission expressed reservations about just thirteen – those dealing, for example, with the real presence at the Mass and the role of magic and Cabala in determining the divinity of Christ, along with others possessing unorthodox theological implications. Pico rushed to defend the thirteen publicly in a Latin prose apologia, which appeared toward the end of May 1487, and the Pope condemned the whole enterprise on August 5, though publication of the papal brief itself was delayed, interestingly, until December 15.

To escape arrest, Pico left Rome and fled to France, where in January 1488 he was caught and briefly imprisoned at the pope's request by Philip of Savoy. But King Charles VIII and other influential voices took up his cause, and by June the pope had permitted him to return to Florence on condition he refrain from any more discussion of the *Conclusiones*. He settled in a villa at Querceto near Fiesole lent him by Lorenzo de' Medici, and in the remaining years of his truncated life, he wrote a short polemical treatise defending the Aristotelian thesis that being is the primary metaphysical hypostasis (1491) and labored at, but never finished, a series of commentaries on the Psalms and a long treatise directed against the claims of divinatory astrology (both of which remained unpublished in his lifetime). However, from the viewpoint of this essay, which aims to explore aspects of Pico's Neoplatonism, particularly his understanding of Platonic exegesis, his most interesting works are (1) a seven-part treatise on the six days of the Mosaic creation, the Latin *Heptaplus*, written and published in 1489 and dedicated to Lorenzo de' Medici, and (2) a youthful endeavor and his first work, the Italian *Commento*. This was compiled in 1486, though not published until 1519, and it has a very complicated history. Both these texts raise, in rather different ways, the *Commento* even more so perhaps, the problem of being a Platonic exegete and interpreter and thus of determining the parameters of

explaining, allegorizing, and extrapolating and ultimately of theologizing itself.

Let us begin then with what is now known as the *Commento*, an unfinished series of notes Pico first compiled in the autumn of 1486 on his way to Rome, when he took refuge for a few weeks at his country retreat in Fratta near Perugia, after his escapade with Margherita (the unhappily married wife of a minor Medici *signore*, a tax collector in Arezzo).[1] Here he began to prepare in earnest for his council and was joined by two Hebrew scholars and by a close friend and admirer, Girolamo Benivieni (1453–1542).[2] Benivieni was a fine and subtle poet who was buried eventually in the same tomb with Pico in the Dominican church of San Marco – the church of the fiery Savonarola, who played a signal role in both their lives – and he had written a self-declaredly Platonizing love poem, a *canzone* beginning "Amor, dalle cui man sospes' el freno / Del mio cor pende." This was known as the *Canzona dell' amor celeste e divino*, and it summarized four brief passages (I.3, II.5,7, V.4, VI.4,6–7) from Ficino's commentary on the *Symposium*, the *De amore*, which had been composed in 1469 and was already becoming the most influential of Ficino's Plato commentaries.[3] Benivieni's poem was itself modeled on a famous poem, "Donna me prega," by Dante's contemporary, Guido Cavalcanti, which Ficino mentions in the *De amore* (even though it was Aristotelian, not Platonic, in inspiration!) in order to flatter his own friend Giovanni Cavalcanti, a descendent of Guido's.[4] Pico's notes on "Amor, dalle cui" consist of a general Platonizing introduction, divided into three unequal books, followed by a section of particular commentary on the canzone's nine stanzas, stanzas that Benivieni subsequently altered or added in various places to accommodate Pico's ideas or requests (he added what is now stanza 3, for instance).[5] Pico seems to have worked up the notes in just

[1] For details see Eugenio Garin, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Vita e dottrina* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1937), 25–6.

[2] See the detailed entry by Cesare Vasoli in the *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* (Rome: Enciclopedia Italiana, 1966), 8:550–5; see also Olga Zorzi Pugliese, "Girolamo Benivieni: Umanista riformatore (dalla corrispondenza inedita)," *La bibliofilia* 72 (1970): 253–88.

[3] See Olga Zorzi Pugliese, "Variations on Ficino's *De amore*: The Hymns to Love by Benivieni and Castiglione," in *Ficino and Renaissance Neoplatonism*, ed. Konrad Eisenbichler and Olga Zorzi Pugliese (Ottowa: Dovehouse Editions, 1986), 113–21.

[4] See Massimo Ciavolella, "Eros/Ereos: Marsilio Ficino's Interpretation of Guido Cavalcanti's 'Donna me prega,'" in *Ficino and Renaissance Neoplatonism*, 39–48.

[5] See Eugenio Garin, "Marsilio Ficino, Gioralamo Benivieni, e Giovanni Pico," *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana* 23, nos. 1–2 (1942): 93–9.

a few weeks, even as he was preparing his defense of the 900 theses, for he had already sent drafts of them to Girolamo's brother, Domenico, by November 10, 1486. Pico also sent a draft to Ficino, presumably for his reactions. In working through it, however, Ficino found several off-the-cuff attacks on his own views, either aimed at him directly or at "a distinguished Platonist" who was wrong on such and such an issue (clearly himself), and he was agitated enough to pen his own marginalia, with abrupt remarks such as "This is a bad mistake," before sending the draft back to Pico.

Nonetheless, this scholarly contention did not develop, as it well might have, into an academic feud or estrangement, even though Pico, in revising and reorganizing, took only partial, one might even say high-handed, account of Ficino's corrections, incorporating some of them and rebutting others, and also asseverated at the end of 2.2 that Marsilio had "made mistakes on every subject in every part of his treatise [i.e., the *De amore*]." Irenically, however, Ficino was one of the influential voices who defended Pico after the banning of the Roman disputation, and he helped Pico to obtain Medici patronage, even writing a letter dated May 30, 1488, on Lorenzo's behalf inviting Pico as another Saturnian to come to live and philosophize in Florence.[6] Pico in reply addresses Ficino as "father of the Platonic family" and as his life's "solace," his mind's "delight," conduct's "guide," and learning's "master" (*disciplinae magister*).[7] In any event, from the onset Pico had regarded his own commentary notes as preliminary speculations, and he says several times that he is going to write more about various topics in three future treatises: a commentary on the *Symposium*, a poetic theology, and a love treatise. None of these ever materialized, though he may have been drawing on notes that he had begun to compile for them. Very soon, understandably, he lost interest in the whole project, as his "council" and other issues became more pressing, though he did extract some formulations from the *Commento* in preparing his *Heptaplus*.[8]

Pico died on November 17, 1494, and in 1496 his nephew Gianfrancesco published his uncle's collected works in two volumes with a

[6] This is now in Ficino's *Opera omnia* (Basel: Heinrich Petri, 1576), 888–9, in his eighth book of *Letters*. This edition has been reproduced in modern times, most recently by Phénix Editions, Paris, 1999. See, too, Ficino's letter to Salviati and Benivieni in praise of Pico as Count of Concordia and as the child of the Graces possessed of wisdom, eloquence, and virtue (ibid., 890).

[7] Ibid., 889.

[8] Ibid., 98.

prefatory biography, but he did not include the *Commento*, though the table of contents lists an *In Platonis Convivium* lib. III. Benivieni too deliberately suppressed Pico's original version and eventually reorganized, expanded, and in places completely rewrote an expurgated version that omitted the references to Ficino and was stylistically and in other aspects much more polished. In the process, he collapsed books 2 and 3, inserted his poem at the end of the new book 2, and titled the particular commentary book 3. It seems that, like Gianfrancesco, he and other friends were anxious to conceal the disagreements with Ficino, lest these disagreements and indeed the relationship between the two luminaries be misunderstood. Moreover, since Ficino himself certainly considered the notes replete with youthful errors whose publication would not enhance Pico's reputation, as he had observed in a letter to Germain de Ganay in Paris dated March 23, 1495,[9] the circle of mutual friends may well have agreed with him, particularly if Pico himself had come to acknowledge some errors before he died. More problematically, at the turn of the century, Benivieni, now an ardent and devout *piagnone* who repented his earlier life as a love poet, cannibalized portions from Pico's notes when he decided to publish a prose commentary of his own to accompany a selection of a hundred poems, but not, remarkably, the canzone "Amor, dalle cui," that he had written earlier but had reworked and "reformed" in the light of his new spirituality. This commentary appeared in Florence in 1500 and was entitled *Commento di Hieronymo Benivieni sopra a più sue canzone et sonetti dello Amore et della Bellezza divina.*[10]

Finally, to compound the confusion, in 1518 a relative of Ficino's, Biagio Buonaccorsi, used Benivieni's expurgated version (but collated in part, it would seem, with a manuscript of the unexpurgated one!) to prepare another edition of Benivieni's poems that would include both the *Commento* as such and "Amor, dalle cui." This was the Giunta edition of Benivieni's *Opere* (it included an errata sheet), which was published in Florence in 1519 with the *Commento* as the first item and with the poem appearing between books 2 and 3. Occupying some 67 octavo leaves, Pico's work was now entitled *Commento delo illustrissimo Signore Conte Iohanni Pico Miradulano sopra una Canzona de Amore composta da Hieronymo Benivieni Ciptadino Fiorentino secondo la mente & opinione de'*

[9] Edited by Paul O. Kristeller in his *Supplementum Ficinianum*, 2 vols. (Florence: Olschki, 1937), 2:91–3. The letter is dated March 23, 1494, Florentine style.

[10] See Olga Zorzi Pugliese, "Benivieni's *Commento* and Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*: Autobiography and Ideology," *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* 30 (1994): 347–62.

Platonici. Benivieni must have known all about the venture and about Buonaccorsi's attempt to rework the *Commento*, but he claims partial ignorance. The 1519 text was then reprinted in the Venice 1522 edition of Benivieni's *Opere*, with the errata corrected, and this 1522 version of the *Commento* was thereafter published in the three Basel editions of Pico della Mirandola's own *Opera omnia* (1557, 1572, and 1601), where it is listed in the table of contents as "three books on Plato's *Symposium*," though properly entitled *Commento* in the text itself.[11]

Obviously the problems of editing the *Commento* and of deciding which version or versions to privilege are fraught with challenges, particularly since Benivieni's caliber as a poet makes his own contribution and his reworking both of the commentary and of the canzone important aspects of the story and since too he was in a position to analyze Pico's intentions better than any of his contemporaries, let alone modern scholars, however distinguished. And I am thinking here of Eugenio Garin in particular, who has done more than anyone else to enhance our understanding of Pico and his whole age and to uncover the various stages in the changes and cover-ups; it is he indeed who published the original unexpurgated version in his monumental 1942 edition of Pico's works, the standard edition we still refer to.[12]

In the *Commento*, Pico is concerned, broadly speaking, with poetic theology; he does not comment extensively on Plato's *Symposium* but discusses only selected bits and pieces of it. The work hardly compares to Ficino's *De amore*, either in length or breadth, though it raises a number of subtle points and has a rapid-fire brilliance to it. Nor indeed does it always persuade us that Pico is right in his series of contretemps with Ficino, and its combative mode of arguing has to be understood in the light of the conventions of Renaissance scholarly disagreements, which were voiced, as a rule, in pricklier terms than we usually adopt today. More surprisingly,

[11] It does not appear, incidentally, in the Venice 1557 edition.

[12] Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno, e scritti vari*, ed. Eugenio Garin (Florence: Vallecchi, 1942); the *Commento* appears on pp. 459–81, with Benivieni's *canzona* preceding it on pp. 451–8. I shall also refer to the translation of the *Commento* usefully introduced and annotated by Sears Jayne as *Commentary on a Canzone of Benivieni by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola* (New York: Peter Lang, 1984). Sears Jayne used Garin's text but consulted two other (derivative) MSS – N.A. 1217 in the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence and C. VI.16 in the Biblioteca Communale in Siena – and some of the readings of the various editions (see his stemma, 263–5). Of the surviving MSS, none is a Pico autograph. Another good English translation, by Stephen Salchenberger, was done as a Johns Hopkins University Ph.D. dissertation (1967).

Pico is not (yet) well acquainted with Platonic texts that have a bearing on the *Symposium*, especially the *Phaedrus*, along with Hermias's commentary on it; the *Charmides*; and various sections of the *Enneads*. And despite his protestations, he is not concerned with love theory except in a rudimentary form. What does concern him is metaphysics (which he thinks of as a dimension of theology), especially metaphysics as he sees it embedded in Greco-Roman myth and to a lesser extent in the myths of Egypt and the *Chaldean Oracles* (attributed to Zoroaster, though in fact deriving from the first centuries of the Christian era).

For Renaissance thinkers, myths were the stuff of ancient poetry. Pico, like Ficino (and like Proclus and the Neoplatonists before them), was committed, therefore, to analyzing the divine mysteries embedded especially in poetry and in the hexameters of such pre-Socratic philosophers as Empedocles and Parmenides. That is, he was committed to poetic theologizing on the assumption that the ancient poets and their tales of the gods were a veiled, cryptic unfolding of the fundamentals of religious belief. For Ficino and Pico, the myths indeed constituted a gentile scripture, a scripture revealed, rather than compiled, by a line of ancient theologians, and posing much the same kind of hermeneutical challenges as Solomon's Song of Songs. Collectively they articulated a metaphysics that was almost perfected by Plato (as seen anachronistically through the interpretative eyes of Plotinus) and then truly perfected in Christian theology. The Christian-Platonic philosopher was in their eyes the exemplary hermeneut, the interpreter who could interpret correctly the wealth of pre-Christian, non-Hebrew revelation bestowed by a loving God on the many peoples without access either to the laws of Moses or to the Mosaic books of prophecy, the Pentateuch. This was a revelation mediated by seers, sibyls, and priests but above all by such poets as Orpheus, Hesiod, and Homer – and this despite the fact that Plato had banned poets in general from the ideal city he had envisioned in the *Republic*.

One of the most controversial bits in the *Symposium* is Plato's denigration of Orpheus, otherwise a figure whom Plato seems to have revered and whose fragments he cited as possessed of religious authority. At 179A–D, Phaedrus is said to have called Orpheus a coward on the grounds that he "showed no spirit" when, while still a living person, he tried to "scheme his way into Hades" in order to rescue Eurydice. A "mere harp-player or minstrel," says Phaedrus, and a "lukewarm lover," he "did not dare to die for love," as Alcestis by contrast had dared. Accordingly, he was sent back from Hades empty-handed, having seen the mere wraith of a woman. As a consequence of his refusal to die for love, the gods had doomed

him "to meet his death at the hands of women," for heaven itself has a peculiar regard for ardor and resolution in the cause of love (179D). At the pertinent moment in his *De amore* (1.4), Ficino had declined to venture an interpretation of this notable reference that Plato had put into the mouth, significantly, of the banquet's first appointed speaker, who was also the eponymous hero of Plato's other great dialogue on love and poetic theology. "At the moment," Ficino writes, "I do not intend to enquire into the allegory of Alcestis and Orpheus." Later, however, at 7.14, he did argue that Orpheus was subject to all four of the divine furies and not just to the amatory, while Socrates was especially subject to the amatory.[13] And in a letter to Braccio Martelli dated January 20, 1491, he eventually suggested that the etymology of Eurydice signified "amplitude" (*euros*) of the "judgment" (*dikê*) and that whereas Orpheus had to descend into hell to gaze upon his beloved again, Plato, in order to see the same Eurydice, was about to "ascend to heaven" (a reference apparently to Ficino's hopes for a revival in his own age of Christian Platonism and with it of the original union between religion and philosophy).[14] Given Ficino's youthful Orphism – his admiration for the Orphic hymns and fragments; his identification of Orpheus as third in the succession of the six principal ancient theologians that was to culminate in Plato; his elevation of Orpheus to the status of the gentiles' David; his sense of Orpheus as a great magician-magus who could enchant the world of nature; and his own musical and magical interests and his skills as a performer on an Orphic lyre, which led contemporaries to praise him specifically as an Orpheus reborn – given all these dimensions of his Orphism, it is not surprising that he was reluctant to tackle what seemed to be a defamatory passage, though he would surely have agreed with Phaedrus's conclusion that "the lover, by virtue of Love's inspiration, is always nearer than the beloved to the gods" (180AB).

Pico was more intrepid. In his particular commentary on Benivieni's poem's fourth stanza, specifically on the lemma *Da lui el foco*, he argues as follows:

> Plato says that although Orpheus wanted to go to see his beloved Eurydice, he was not willing to go to her through death, because he had been made soft and weak by his own music. Instead he tried to find a way of going to her alive, and therefore, Plato says, Orpheus was not able to reach the true Eurydice, but was shown only a ghost or apparition of her. It turns out the same way

[13] *Phaedrus* 244A–245C, the *locus classicus*.
[14] Ficino, *Opera omnia*, 918.3.

> for anyone who thinks he is achieving true understanding of the intellectual Ideas without cutting himself off from the functions of the imagination and also the reason. For what he is seeing is not the Ideas themselves, in their true being, but only some fantasm or likeness of them, shining either in the passible intellect or in the imagination. Although this meaning is subtle and profound, it is nevertheless so consistent with the facts that it seems to me almost a wonder that neither Marsilio nor anyone else has understood it on the basis of Plato's text. My conscience is my witness, that the first time I ever read the *Symposium*, I had no sooner finished reading Plato's words in this passage than this interpretation came into my mind. I shall explain it more fully in my commentary on the *Symposium* and in my Poetic Theology.[15]

Interestingly, Edgar Wind argues that the notion that Orpheus was not prepared to die for his beloved must have been a widely diffused "doctrine" in the Medici circle.[16] Witness the testimony of Lorenzo the Magnificent himself, who died in 1492. In a commentary on his own love sonnet sequence, Lorenzo explains why he had commenced the sequence with a sonnet on death: "If love has in it a certain perfection, . . . it is impossible to arrive at that perfection without first dying with regard to the more imperfect things. . . . And because Orpheus did not really die, he was debarred from the perfection of felicity" and lost his Eurydice. Eventually, indeed, the Thracian bard was savagely dismembered, and for Orphic initiates this dismemberment became a metaphor for the violence of the descent from unity into multiplicity.[17] Our last Platonic view of the poet is in the myth of Er at the end of the *Republic* (10.620A), where Orpheus has become a misogynist and, from the lots that will determine his life in the next incarnation, selects the life of a swan that only sings as it dies; this was because he "was unwilling to be conceived and born of a woman" given his brutal death at women's hands.

Pico's enthusiasm for this Orpheus-Eurydice myth in the *Symposium* is notable, as the gloss above demonstrates: he is excited and self-congratulatory that he has come upon an interpretation that is both "subtle and profound" and that no one else has discovered beforehand, though it seems so obvious to him – indeed he is scornful that Ficino had

[15] *Commento*, 556; *Commentary*, 149; henceforth formatted as (556 [149]). In his translation, Sears Jayne introduced his own chapter numbering (with a persuasive justification), but, for convenience's sake, I have stayed with Garin's numbering. In 233 n. 45, he notes that Marsilio's name is omitted here in most MSS.

[16] Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 1968), 157, citing Lorenzo de' Medici, *Opere*, ed. Attilio Simioni (Bari: Laterza, 1939), 1:24ff. See also my *Synoptic Art: Marsilio Ficino on the History of Platonic Interpretation* (Florence: Olschki, 1998), 120–2.

[17] Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 173–5.

not even attempted a reading (Pico was of course unencumbered by the multisided Orphism and Orphic commitments of Ficino). For him, the key is the theory of the Platonic Ideas. Orpheus gazed on the images purveyed to him through his imagination or passive reason alone, because he refused to die to these faculties in order to live in the Ideas. The psychological imperative, already articulated in an earlier paragraph dealing with the Alcestis myth, is that, in order to reach "the perfect sublimity of the Ideas," we have to cut ourselves off from the sensible world to the point of no longer living in it any more.[18] But is Pico denying the possibility of achieving this severance in living trance and ecstasy when the intellectual eye reigns supreme? Let us look at the section immediately following, where he turns to what he thinks of as the Cabalistic topic of the "death of the kiss" (in Hebrew, *binsica*).[19]

In the amatory ecstasy or frenzy – and Pico never deals with the other three Platonic ecstasies – which the soul experiences while it is in the body or more properly when the body is in it, the soul separates from the body in the sense that all its lower powers cease to function, but with one exception: the nutritive or vegetative soul continues in a subdued or minimal way to maintain the body's life. Otherwise the soul's intellect is supremely active and gazes upon the heavenly Venus, the Idea of Beauty, "talking with her face to face" and feeding upon her image with its eyes. Pico denominates this ecstasy the soul's "first death."[20] If, however, the activity of the intellect becomes so sovereign that it no longer stops at all, then the body falls totally away from the soul, and the soul joins with the heavenly Venus "in an intimate embrace" that is perfected in the union of the kiss, the two becoming "a single soul." This is the "second death." Pico adds, "Since the Cabalist wise men believe that many of the ancient fathers died in this kind of rapture of the intellect, you will find the Cabalists saying that those fathers died of *binsica* which in our language means death from kissing," and he lists Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, and Mary (i.e., Miriam).[21] The death from kissing occurs "when the soul in intellectual rapture unites so completely with incorporeal things that it rises above the body and leaves it altogether." Solomon longs for such an amatory death, says Pico, in the verse "Kiss me with the kisses of thy mouth" (Canticles 1:2), and Plato too when he speaks of the kisses of

[18] *Commento particulare* (555 [148]).
[19] In general, see Nicholas J. Perella, *The Kiss Sacred and Profane* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).
[20] *Commento particulare* (557 [150]): "la prima morte."
[21] *Commento particulare* (557–8 [150]).

Agathon.[22] This analysis is an opportunity for Pico to display his interest in the Cabalists and their candidates for the second death, including the prophetic sister of Moses and Aaron.

But has he really thought the situation through? Is he saying in effect that Orpheus should have died the second death, that Orpheus should have been a Jacob or a Moses? Or simply that he should have died the first death, that is, fled to Eurydice in intellectual rapture while his body remained alive, albeit in a kind of suspended animation? Or has he now forgotten Orpheus and been swept up by the idea of a total union with intelligible Beauty that cannot be obtained while we are sensible beings? But such a union means, as he had intimated earlier in glossing this same lemma, *Da lui el foco*, that we pass "from human existence to intellectual existence" and are by that death transformed into an angel, as the Cabalists declare Enoch was transformed into Metatron, "the angel of divinity." The heart is burned away in the fire of love as the soul is led, says Pico, by ineffable grace to the Temple of Solomon, "the true habitation of divinity" (I Kings 6:11–13): "O inestimable gift of love which makes men equal to the angels. O wonderful power, which by means of death gives us life."[23] To attain such a gift, the soul separates from the body, but, even more importantly, the body drops away entirely from the soul. We cease to be humans and become angels – the cherubim and seraphim of Ezekiel's great vision.

However, Pico goes on to raise two controversial points. First, in glossing the next lemma, *Per lui el fonte immortale*, he emphasizes that the soul's ecstatic intellectual vision, which is transcendent love of God, is not reciprocated by God; God, he says, does not love us, because such a love in God "would be an imperfection" in him.[24] This is a challenging statement that runs counter to the long tradition in both Platonism and Christianity of denominating God's providential care for his creation the highest kind of love. Presumably Pico is distinguishing erotic love, the love of the lower for the higher, from agapic love, the love of the higher for the lower, and focusing on erotic love on the grounds that Plato had defined love as "the desire for beauty." But if so, why doesn't he mention agapic love and clarify the distinction, especially given the traditional role of love terminology in defining the relationship of creatures to the creator? His

[22] The reference is to Plato's first epigram to Agathon in Diogenes Laertius's *Life of Plato* 32, though Wind also cites the *Greek Anthology* 5.78 (*Pagan Mysteries*, 131 n. 2).
[23] *Commento particulare* (554 [147]). Pico spells it "Matatron."
[24] *Commento particulare* (559 [151]).

intention at this point seems to be to shock the reader, or at least to refute Ficino, who is specifically cited as believing, incorrectly, that God loves us on the grounds that in the very notion of desire there is a Platonic basis for the complementary notion of reciprocation, of the beloved's returning of the lover's love in the threefold movement of giving and receiving and giving again that is figured in the three Graces and their intertwined dance.[25]

Later, in glossing the lemma *Che poi che in sè* in his particular commentary on Benivieni's seventh and eighth stanzas, Pico takes the further step of denying that our love for God is Platonically definable as "a desire for beauty" on the basis of the arresting argument that "there is no beauty in God, according to the Platonists, because of his infinite simplicity," beauty having been previously defined as an ordering of parts into a whole. Rather, says Pico, we can only love God "in Himself" and not "as the author of ideal beauty."[26] All this suggests that Pico has not yet arrived at a coherent theory of the relationship of God to Beauty and of the soul's transition from sensible love to divine love (despite the ladder of Diotima in the *Symposium* 201D–212B), defined as the splendor or radiance of the Ideas seen collectively as the outpouring of Goodness. This is another way of questioning whether Pico has mastered the complex problem, which he inherited from the scholastics, of integrating Beauty into the three other traditional transcendental attributes of God: Goodness, Truth, and Unity. This is especially important given the central role of Beauty in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* and indeed in Neoplatonic metaphysics (not to mention it was reinforced by Ficino in a number of arguments in the *De amore*), and it suggests that Pico is coming up against some fundamental contradictions in his own reading of the *Symposium* and its rearticulation in "Amor, dalle cui."

The soul's pure intellectual vision depends of course on a theory of the soul's ascent and necessarily on the role of its highest faculty and on the corresponding theory of the Ideas seen by that faculty. So let us turn now to Pico's presentation of Platonic psychology in the *Commento*, which is keyed, interestingly, to being and not, as in Ficino, to unity – though we should note that Pico is clearly indebted to the third book of Ficino's *Platonic Theology* and its exploration of God's attributes, including God's role in our understanding. The *Commento* begins with an ontological preoccupation by distinguishing among causal, formal, and participated

[25] Pico treats of the Graces in *Commento* 2.18 (508–9 [113–14]).
[26] *Commento particulare* (575 [164–5]).

being as a fundamental Platonic postulate and by defining God not as being per se but as the cause of being and not as an intellect per se but as the source and cause of all intellect.[27] This leads Pico from the onset to challenge the reaction of amazement by "un gran platonico" (clearly Ficino) to a passage in Plotinus's *Enneads* (5.6.3 or 6.7.37) in which God is said to understand nothing and to castigate him for not realizing that Plotinus merely intended that "the attribute of understanding exists in God in its causal not formal being [*secondo quello essere causale e non secondo quello formale*]."[28] This is demonstrably polemical. Ficino was well grounded in the intricacies of negative theology, the theology that denies the possibility of talking about God except in equivocal terms, and he was to devote some considerable time eventually to commenting on the works of the Dionysius the Areopagite, "the prince of Christian theologians" for him as for Pico,[29] especially *On the Divine Names*. Even more significantly perhaps, he was to compose his longest Plato commentary on the Areopagite's ultimate source and inspiration, the second part of Plato's *Parmenides*, where Plato has the aging Eleatic explore inter alia the consequences that would ensue were the One not to exist.[30] Therefore, Ficino, if amazed at all, as Pico claimed, must have been amazed not at the notion that God cannot be said to understand anything in the way we or even the angels understand (for this was an apophatic argument with which he was wholly familiar) but rather at its role in the particular passage in Plotinus.

One of Pico's most interesting contributions in the *Commento* is, I would argue, his account of the three hypostases, particularly of the second, which the ancient Neoplatonists had identified with Mind but which he identifies with Angel or Angelic Mind. Some of the Neoplatonists had maintained that between the first hypostasis, God or the One or the Good, and the third hypostasis, the World Soul, came a host of intelligible and intellectual creatures whom Christians call the "angels"[31] – and here Pico reveals his medievalism, since Plotinus had spoken simply of Soul and had argued that the World-Soul is the first instance of

[27] *Commento* 1.1 (461–2 [77]).
[28] *Commento* 1.1 (462 [77]).
[29] *Commento* 1.1 (462 [78]).
[30] See my *Icastes: Marsilio Ficino's Interpretation of Plato's* Sophist (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), chap. 1, "The Ficinian *Sophist* and the Controversy with Pico," esp. 39–41ff., 49, with further references.
[31] *Commento* 1.3 (464–5 [79]).

this generic Soul. For this view, Pico specifically cites Proclus, Hermias, and Syrianus (Proclus's teacher), along with the Areopagite and other Christian theologians, probably alluding to Scotus and Giles of Viterbo (since he adduces them later).[32] In his terminology, he is certainly drawing upon Iamblichian and Proclian distinctions between the Ideas (the pure intelligibles) and the highest spiritual beings contemplating them, who are in turn midway between the intelligibles and the host of intellectual beings below them. These are distinctions, incidentally, that postdate Plato and that an enthusiast who assumes the integrity of the Platonic tradition and its hermeneutics can easily read back into the Platonic text, as did the later Neoplatonists as a matter of principle. However, those Pico twice calls the "more perfect Platonists," Plotinus and Porphyry among them, had maintained that between the first and third hypostases there is only one Mind, not many minds, and they had even referred to it as the "son" of the father. This view, he says, is also closer to the opinion of Aristotle, and he prefers it because it enables him to explore the ground common to both Platonists and Aristotelians[33] (such as Avicenna, who is mentioned at the beginning of the next chapter, 1.4). This is an important issue for Pico and is worth looking at in detail.

From his eternity, God creates this single Mind, and since He is the perfect cause, it is a perfect effect and is unique. This is God's sole creation in the sense that it alone comes "directly" (*immediatamente*) from him.[34] And here Pico again attacks Ficino, this time for maintaining (presumably in *De amore* 4.4) that "according to Plato" human souls are also created directly by God, a view maintained by neither Plotinus nor Proclus nor their followers. But Pico is ignoring the problems generated by the Platonic account of the Demiurge in the *Timaeus*, where the creator God does create human souls directly, while leaving younger gods to fashion the human body; further, this Demiurge cannot be equated with the World Soul, since the *Timaeus* specifically says that the Demiurge creates the World Soul (30B, 34Bff.). Again either Pico is being precipitate and not acknowledging the complexity of the problems or else he is choosing radically to simplify them. At all events, this first unique creature had been variously called by the ancients "Wisdom" "the Son," "Mind," "Divine Reason," even "The Word,"[35] though Pico argues that we should not identify

[32] *Commento* 2.13 (502 [108]).
[33] *Commento* 1.3 (464–5 [79–80]).
[34] *Commento* 1.4 (465–6 [80–1]).
[35] *Commento* 1.5 (466–7 [81]).

this Platonic Word with the Christian Son of God (yet this is precisely what Ficino does do and is eager to do in the conviction that Plato had foreseen, at least in part, the mystery of the Trinity and the creative if not the redemptive power of the Son). Pico's grounds are twofold: there is the familiar theological definition that the Son is of one essence with, is consubstantial with, the Father, and there is the less familiar argument that the Christian Son is a creator whereas the second Platonic hypostasis is a creature and must therefore be identified with the first and noblest angel created by God.[36] God, in short, creates Mind as Angelic Being, as Angel.

Nonetheless, Pico has to dovetail this theory of the first unique creature into the Platonic account in the *Timaeus* (28A–29A) of the role of the Ideas and of the Ideas collectively as the model, exemplar, or paradigm to which the Demiurge turns when he creates the world. For the Neoplatonists, if not Plato himself, the first progression or emanation from the One (it is not a "creation" per se) is not the creation of the world but the emergence of thought and of thinking, defined as intelligible being. But since God has created the Ideas or Forms of all things in that first Mind, where they have their formal being, he has created in it the intelligible world, and our sensible world, governed in its entirety by the World Soul, is an image and likeness of this Idea world.[37] This seems clear enough, but Pico proceeds to introduce several complicating factors.

The ancient theologians, he says, had "concealed their mysteries under poetic veils," meaning in effect under the veils of mythology.[38] They had equated God with Uranus, Mind with Cronus (Saturn), and the World Soul with Jupiter, observing the following basic principle: Uranus must stand for anything that is preeminent (as the firmament is preeminent), Saturn for "the property of being intellectual," and Jupiter for "the property of being active" in ruling over inferiors.[39] This triple principle is derived in fact from the etymologies explored in Plato's *Cratylus*, where Uranus is the upward-regarding or contemplative power, Cronus the self-regarding or self-reflective power, and Zeus the downward-regarding or regulative power. Ficino sets out the same set of arguments in his *Phaedrus* commentary.[40] Both Florentine thinkers understood the Proclian-inspired equations that allow for Saturn to exercise at times a

[36] *Commento* 1.5 (467 [81]).
[37] *Commento* 1.6 (467–8 [81–2]).
[38] *Commento* 1.8 (470 [83]).
[39] *Commento* 1.8 (470–1 [84]).
[40] *In Phaedrum* 10.6,12, 11.11. See my *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 124–6.

Uranian or a Jovian power or for Uranus to exercise a Jovian power, though Pico breaks with Ficino in denying that Uranus can exercise a Saturnian power on the grounds that he transcends the intellect entirely. For these equations presuppose that any deity can exercise any or all of these powers on the grounds that each deity is in its own way all other deities in what is in essence a monotheistic system concealed beneath a polytheistic rind. It also means that any reference to a deity, or indeed to the deity's attendant *daemons*, has to be interpreted with extreme care, since several readings are simultaneously possible and at times may even run in parallel.

But how do we dovetail this poetic-theological account of Saturn into his role as the signifier of Angel or Mind, and in what way is Mind preeminently and characteristically Saturnian? What happens in effect when one brings to bear all the various intractable aspects of the larger Saturn myth: his castrating his father, his cannibalizing his offspring, his imprisonment by Jupiter after Jupiter has usurped his throne, and so on?[41]

Pico is led to confront some of the key problems associated with the Platonic Mind, which he identifies as the first and "noblest" angel and as the intelligible world within it, that is, as the Ideas or Forms of all things that will be created subsequent to it.[42] Since it has been created, and created solely by God, it is a creature "as perfect as it is possible for a created thing to be."[43] It is the "perfect effect" of a perfect cause and is unique as God is unique; and yet it consists for Pico, who is thinking here in an Aristotelian way, of potency and act, the former being inferior to the latter. Potency he hastens to equate with "the unlimited" in the famous passage in the *Philebus* (23Cff.), and act he equates with "the limit," and then suggests that in some sense at least the former is a kind of matter (though matter differs with differing levels of being) and that the latter is form.[44] In regard to this being, Angel or Mind is compounded of two contrary principles, like every other created thing existing between the two uncompounded extremes of God and prime matter. But Pico moves into difficult terrain when he assumes that the potency of Mind is in some senses its imperfection, though he formulates

[41] On the "dark" side of Saturn, see Gianni Guastella, "Saturn, Lord of the Golden Age," in *Saturn from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, ed. Massimo Ciavolella and Amilcare A. Ianucci (Toronto: Dovehouse Editions, 1992), 1–22.

[42] *Commento* 1.6 (467–8 [82]).

[43] *Commento* 1.4 (465–6 [80–1]).

[44] *Commento* 1.9 (472 [85]).

this as follows: whatever imperfection Mind possesses is the result of its potency, and whatever perfection it has is the result of its act.[45] But Mind, identified hypostatically with Saturn, nonetheless has three functions – a Saturnian contemplation of (Ficino was to call this, more logically, a Uranian regarding of) things higher than itself (but such can only be God); a Saturnian contemplation "that stays within itself" (Ficino was to call this self-regarding), that is, a contemplation of itself as the first, most perfect creature; and a Jovian downward, providential regarding of the universe it creates.[46] But how can any one of these three functions, though grouped in a descending hierarchy, be deemed imperfect?

Pico performs a sleight of hand here by attributing Mind's Saturnian (Uranian) regard upward to its act, its Saturnian regard self-ward to its act and potency, and its Jovian regard downward to its potency.[47] But this distribution becomes untenable if we introduce his identifications of potency with matter and act with form. For Mind's Jovian regard downward is an extending downward not of its matter but of its form, an exercising not of its limitlessness but of its limit. Indeed, none of these three functions remains a potency: all three are exercised as acts. Moreover, since Mind is the first one-and-many and exists both as the first angel and as the plenitude of the Ideas, it is the first unitary composite and therefore the first beautiful thing: not so much the absolute, exemplary unique Idea of Beauty as the composite, manifold, universal beauty, the splendor, Ficino would consistently call it, of all the Ideas, the attractiveness or grace (*quello decore e grazia*), says Pico, which results from their diversity.[48] But such beauty, he argues in 2.8, is the result of both discord and concord, of unity and of contrariety, of Venus's companionship with Mars: "This can be taken as a true definition of such beauty: it is nothing other than a friendly enmity, or a harmonious discord." In addition, he cites Heraclitus on strife as the father of all things and Empedocles on the ever-during alternation of love and strife.[49] Only God is without contrariety or discord, whereas Angel and Beauty alike are composed of potency and act, of discord and concord. They constitute accordingly the *concordia discors* and *discordia concors* of the Renaissance choric ideal of harmony, which is at the same time the personal, the political, and the cosmic ideal of the entire European age.

[45] *Commento* 1.9 (472 [85–6; but *ogni perfezione* is rendered as "every attribute"]).
[46] *Commento* 1.9 (472–3 [86]).
[47] Ibid.
[48] *Commento* 2.13 (503 [109]).
[49] *Commento* 2.8 (495–6 [102–3]).

For a Platonic elucidation of this fundamental metaphysical issue, Pico turns to an amalgam of the lemmata in the memorable account of Love's birth attributed by Socrates to Diotima in the *Symposium* (203Bff.): "Love was born in the gardens of Jupiter on the birth day of Venus, after Porus had joined with Penia, all the gods being seated at the banquet, and Porus himself, the son of counsel, being drunk with nectar." For it is these lemmata that constitute, I believe, the greatest mystery of the *Symposium* for Pico and that occasioned some of his most fertile ideas as a Platonizing hermeneut.[50] In 2.13, he asserts that after God Himself, there trailed "an unformed substance" (*quella natura informe*) that must originally have been prime matter; but when it was given form by God, it became Angel-Mind, the form consisting of the Ideas that emerge from God as their source and that collectively constitute Beauty.[51] But all things, he goes on, become imperfect as they move away from God and mix with the unformed substance of Mind, which till now had been completely untouched by the form-giving power of the Ideas (*in tutto disforme dalla formosità d'esse Idee*). This is at first glance a series of self-contradictory arguments, particularly so in light of the proposition at the end of book 1, namely, that the Ideas have (1) their causal being in God and are therefore not in God; (2) their formal being in Mind, who "is counseled" by God (meaning furnished with the Ideas needed to make this sensible world);[52] and (3) their participated being in (rational) Soul, where they are called rational principles or reasons.[53] But it underscores a real and enduring problem in the Neoplatonic emanatory system: Mind without the Ideas must have been not only unformed but also, in a way, in potency, unlimited, in a state (however we may define such a state) of imperfection, of what Pico here calls an "opacity."[54] Consequently, it must have been a quasi-matter.

Pico goes on to demarcate yet further intermediate stages: with the coming of the Ideas, Mind does indeed contain their beauty within itself, but problematically, since "that beauty is still imperfect and obscured by the darkness, the opacity of Mind's own substance." Hence, "there inevitably arises in angelic Mind a desire to possess the Ideas in their

[50] They also intrigued Ficino, as his *De amore* 6.7 demonstrates, but that is a matter for another occasion.

[51] *Commento* 2.13 (501 [107]). And Pico himself refers us to 1.9.

[52] *Commento* 2.21 (513 [117]), on Porus the son of counsel. See Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 276–81.

[53] *Commento* 1.13 (480 [92]).

[54] *Commento* 2.13 (501 [107]).

perfect form," and this desire is a desire for beauty and constitutes therefore (though Pico never exactly says this) the first instance of love.[55] Though Mind is the first creature to love beauty, this beauty is the beauty of the Ideas as they are causally in God, who is without composition and without Ideas. Pico therefore adapts his argument. For desire could never arise in Mind if the Ideas were not there in it, since Mind's desire would not know what to desire, or if they were in it completely, in which case Mind would no longer desire but already possess the Ideas.[56] Thus Love is born when Porus (Plenty), meaning the multitude of the Ideas in Mind, is united with Penia (Need), meaning, not the essence per se of Mind, but the unformed, deficient, or imperfect state, the Jovian state, of that essence, which Pico sees Plato signifying in the *Symposium's* image of "the gardens of Jupiter" (203B). This birth moment is the uniting of act with potency, the planting of the Ideas in the garden of Mind, a planting that gives rise to Paradise, or rather to Mind as Paradise.[57]

Pico stumbles, however, when he goes on to declare that the desire was born from a union between the perfect state of the Ideas, signified by Porus, the son of Counsel, that is, of God,[58] and the Ideas' defective or imperfect state in the incomplete, unformed substance, signified by Penia. Love could only be born after ideal Beauty had been born in Mind; thus it was born on Venus's birthday, later defined as the day "when the beauty of the Ideas first descended into Angelic Mind."[59] This natal day of Venus, when the goddess was "still new-born," signifies that she had not yet reached perfection; thus her beauty lacked perfection, and the splendor of the Ideas that is Beauty lacked perfection.[60] Nonetheless, Love was born at that time in Mind, born as the desire "to possess more perfectly that beauty it already possessed in some measure [*già in qualche modo avea*]" but not fully. Awakened by this love, Mind turned toward God "and received from Him the perfecting of the beauty of the Ideas." And only then when Mind possessed the Ideas and their beauty did Venus become a fully grown goddess, "that is, reached perfection in Mind."[61] For at such a time, it would seem to follow, Mind is no longer in a state of desire but is at one with, and made perfect by, God. On this natal day, however, the

[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] *Commento* 2.13 (502 [107–8]).
[58] Isaiah 9:6 and Proverbs 8:14.
[59] *Commento* 2.16 (508 [113]).
[60] *Commento* 2.13 (503 [108–9]).
[61] *Commento* 2.16 (508 [113]).

gods were seated at the banquet, the gods meaning, in the Pythagorean-Parmenidean manner, says Pico, the Ideas which precede Venus herself, since she is the beauty or grace, he reiterates, which results from all the Ideas.[62] She is therefore born after them – with the implication that for the gods she is not, or not yet, the goddess of beauty and of love but merely a divine child.

The banquet itself consists of nectar and ambrosia, the food and drink of eternity and immortality which the charioteer in the great mythical hymn of the *Phaedrus* gives to the soul's twin horses of concupiscence and irascibility when they return "home" (247E), having winged their way across the intellectual heavens to the utmost rim, where the soul could gaze out from afar at the intelligibles themselves. Pico takes Plato's description of Porus as drunk with nectar to signify "the sheer multiplicity of the Ideas" (*l'affluenzia universale d'esse idée*),[63] presumably the Ideas of all the other things that were there in Mind, or possibly all the Ideas not yet signified by the gods who were invited to the banquet and who formally and causally preceded Venus. For, he concludes 2.13 with the argument that "although the Ideas of other things existed in the Angelic Mind, Plato does not say that they were welcomed to the banquet, because the gift of immortality was not granted to them."[64]

In Plato's own dialogic banquet, Phaedrus's speech at 178A–B is keyed to the Orphic notion that Love, traditionally the child of Venus, is paradoxically the oldest of the gods, since he was "born from the bosom of chaos before all the other gods."[65] Moreover, writes Pico in 2.22, he was "the first of all the gods to achieve natural or perfected being," and he gave such being to the other gods. Countering Phaedrus at 195A–C, Agathon declares that Love is the most blessed and the loveliest of the gods, since he is the youngest and flees forever the ravages of time, shunning the very sight of senility. Pico resolves the apparent paradox by declaring that Love is the oldest god, because he existed before the other gods, who, as the Ideas, were to achieve their "natural" or "perfected" being only after Love had caused Mind to return to the One and in turn to receive its natural being; in other words, the Ideas were still in Mind

[62] *Commento* 2.13 (503 [109]).
[63] *Commento* 2.13 (504 [109]).
[64] Ibid. In his *Commentary*, Sears Jayne argues, "This sentence is clearly a mistake. Pico has just explained that all of the Ideas are immortal, yet here he says that only some of them are. This confusion may explain why in his own MS he had deleted this passage" (204 n. 151).
[65] See the Orphic *Argonautica* 419–25.

imperfectly (*secondo il loro essere ideale imperfetto*). But he is the youngest and the most beautiful god, because the other gods existed before him, not, as one might have anticipated from Pico's earlier arguments, in their cause, the One, but rather joined to the still unformed substance of Mind in an ideal but imperfect way. From this perspective, Love was not born in Mind until after Mind had been furnished, albeit imperfectly, with the Ideas.[66] An old-young god, therefore, though Pico does not pursue the paradox, he is a mysterious *paidogeron*, a child-father, who has not even been conceived on the day that Venus was born and the gods banqueted together in celebration of her coming. And yet on that very day in the gardens of Jupiter – that is, in "the unformed substance of angelic Mind" and from the mixing of the perfection of the Ideas, which is Porus, with their imperfection and their want of being perfect, which is Penia, "poor and indigent, being devoid of all being and all act" (*d'ogni essere e d'ogni atto priva*) – Love was born, even as his mother was still a babe.[67]

Interestingly, Ficino had confronted the same conundrums in his *De amore*, both at 5.10 and earlier at 1.3, when he attempted his own unfolding of the mystery of Mind and its threefold emanation from, turning back toward, and returning to the One. Both thinkers are struck by the Orphic notion of the "bosom of chaos" and argue that Mind was in a sense a chaos, a chaos waiting nonetheless to be a cosmos.[68] Pico adduces the Orphic verses in 2.14 and 2.22 and observes that Mind could "rightly be called a chaos" when it was first filled with all the Ideas and the Ideas were still "imperfect, indistinct as it were, and confused."[69] In it, Love was born, that is, Mind's desire to perfect the Ideas.[70] Since the Ideas can be perfected only when they are separated from what is alien to them, separated in effect from the as yet unformed chaos of Mind and returned to their source in the One, Mind must itself revert to God and unite with him. Thus Mind completes what Pico calls "the first circle" (*il primo circulo*) of returning to its own first and final cause and to the Ideas' first cause, namely, to the unity of God.[71] When it does so, it possesses the beauty of the Ideas in their perfection, and at that point Venus becomes adult, becomes a perfect, a sovereign goddess in Mind.[72]

[66] *Commento* 2.22 (513–15 [117–18]).
[67] *Commento* 2.13 (502–3 [108]).
[68] *Argonautica* 419–25. See n. 62 above.
[69] *Commento* 2.14 (504 [110]).
[70] Ibid.
[71] *Commento* 2.15 (505 [110]).
[72] *Commento* 2.16 (508 [113]).

Despite this ideal triadic encircling of Mind and the notion of its return and perfection, eventually Mind succumbs to time in what seems to be the onset of a Saturnian aging and fatigue, succumbs, that is, to a new inferior order. In the Ancients' poetic mythology, Jupiter, the World Soul, escapes being consumed by Saturn, as thoughts are consumed by their thinker: in his stead, his father is given a stone (the stone of the sensible world, of sensible images and data) to swallow down. Timeless Mind is then overthrown in time by his youngest son, who has returned to cast his progenitor into the prison of materiality, to become by usurpation the new father of gods and men even as he continues to listen to the counsels of his own aged father.[73] The unitary, contemplative realm of Mind is subsequently divided into the three realms of heaven, earth, and Hades, which are ruled over respectively by Saturn's sons, Jupiter, Neptune, and Pluto, Neptune being the power who presides over the whole realm of generation and corruption, the ebb and flow of being born and dying.[74] For Pico and Ficino, this violent revolution or succession myth, like other such myths, speaks to a fundamental aspect of the Neoplatonic metaphysics of emanation: the mystery of the violence involved in the hypostatic succession, the wrenching descent of levels of being, and in Jupiter's particular case the violence integral to Soul's emergence from Mind. But it no longer seems to accommodate Pico's initial account of Love and Beauty.

Accordingly, he turned to the unfolding of another of the *Symposium's* mysteries: Plato's reference at 180D–E to another Venus, the daughter of Uranus. This, the heavenly Venus, had another birthday altogether, since she was never a babe but was born a perfect nymph, a Nereid from the sea's foam, when Uranus's sperm was cast by Saturn as he cut off his father's testicles into the waves of matter. These violent and disturbing images are an integral part of this, one of the most rebarbative of the Greco-Roman myths. But they pose the kind of interpretational challenge that Pico reveled in, particularly when we recall that he was well aware that Proclus and other antique interpreters had taught, following the lead of the mythological passages in Plato's dialogues, that all the traditional myths were theological at heart and that one had to exercise extreme subtlety and inventiveness rather than caution in their exposition. Indeed, the more repellent the myth, the more profound its hidden mystery and the greater the distinction-making skill and zeal expected of

[73] *Commento* 2.20 (511–12 [115–16]).
[74] *Commento* 1.10 (475–6 [88–9]).

its interpreter, as Dionysius the Areopagite had stressed in his work *On the Celestial Hierarchy* (2.3).[75] The myth of the Anadyomene certainly spurred Pico into boldly suggesting that the sea was the unformed substance that was first found in Mind and was the primal Oceanus or Neptune, as certain Platonists had maintained, and that in sense Venus was united with Mind.[76] He turns for confirmation to references in Moses, David, Origen, and Pletho to the effect that "waters" are a recurring image for the seas "upon which God founded the whole world."[77]

Since Uranus, as God, creates only the first angel, "whom the Platonists call Mind, and the poets, Saturn," who in turn creates the rest of the universe, God is figuratively sterile after he has created Mind, having been in a way castrated by Mind.[78] But Pico avoids reconciling the notion of Saturn as castrator with the notion of Saturn as himself the foam-flecked sea, the unformed matter or substance of Mind, which is impregnated by the sperm from Uranus's testicles, allegorized by Pico as "the plenitude of the Ideas."[79] Mysteriously, then, Venus is born as the Beauty or Grace which comes from the Ideas in their variety, the variety without which there can be no beauty and which they derive, Pico says, from being mixed with Mind's substance. Moreover, since he also identifies this substance with the Necessity of the *Timaeus* (47Eff.), he can argue that the Ideas first came into Mind during the reign of Necessity and were thus not yet in their perfect state; only in the succeeding reign of Love, when Mind turned to God, did the imperfect Ideas within it become perfected.[80]

In all these arguments, based as they are on the gift of the Ideas to a still imperfect Mind and on the identification of Venus with the collective splendor and yet variety of the Ideas, Pico treads a tightrope across the chasm, on the one hand, of inherited mythological contradictions and, on the other, of various Neoplatonic attempts to distinguish the stages in the emanation, not only of becoming, but of being itself, however envisioned and defined.

Behind all this Neoplatonic allegoresis, with its unveiling of myth-inspired notions of the emanation and procession of the Ideas, of Mind, of the two

[75] See Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 133–8.
[76] *Commento* 2.19 (510 [115]). See 3.1 (522 [122]).
[77] *Commento* 2.19 (510–11 [115]). See Psalm 136:6: "Him that stretched out the earth above the waters."
[78] *Commento* 2.20 (511–12 [115–16]).
[79] *Commento* 2.20 (512 [116]).
[80] *Commento* 2.23 (515–16 [118–19]).

Venuses, and of their accompanying Loves, there looms for Pico – and for Pico much more, I think, than for Ficino – the authority and the ever presence of Genesis. This is not only the definitive account for the Judeo-Christian tradition of the beginning of things, it excels, Pico declares in the proem to the second exposition of the *Heptaplus*, "all other progeny of the human mind in doctrine, eloquence, and genius," even as it is the product of Moses having to speak "with a veiled face" (*velata facie*).[81] For a consideration of what Genesis, or more particularly its first twenty-seven verses, meant to a Neoplatonizing Pico, we must turn to this *Heptaplus* of 1489, where he produced a sevenfold interpretation of the six days of the Biblical creation and of the seventh day of God's rest and added in an appendix a Cabalistic reading of the Bible's opening phrase. In this complex treatise, the Mosaic account of creation is approached by way of two dominant perspectives: the perspective, predictably for a Christian, of Christology and the perspective, once again, of Neoplatonic metaphysics and allegorizing which Pico and Ficino wished to reconcile with the lore of Moses and whose cosmological principles were embodied in Plato's *Timaeus*. For both, it and the biblical Genesis described the creation of nature by divine command and from a void or chaos that Christian commentators had traditionally interpreted as "from nothingness" (*ex nihilo*), a notion open to a number of interpretations and questions and definable perhaps only by reference to the contrasting notion of *cosmos*, which means in Greek that which is good and beautiful because ordered and structured. But whatever the allure for Ficino of Plato's *Timaeus*, for Pico Moses's first book took precedence, and eventually it dominated his attempt to understand the origin of things Platonically. Genesis became in effect the most profound of Platonic texts and enabled him to look beyond the *Timaeus, Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and other Platonic dialogues in much the same way that the *Parmenides* – for the Neoplatonists, Plato's comprehensive masterpiece – had enabled Proclus and his successors to look beyond them.

[81] *Heptaplus*, proem 2. The Latin text is found in *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno, e scritti vari*, 222. The English translation cited here is that of Douglas Carmichael in Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man, On Being and the One, Heptaplus*, trans. Charles Glenn Wallis, Paul J. W. Miller, and Douglas Carmichael (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 94–5. Hereafter references are formatted as *Heptaplus* (222 [94–5]). In general see Crofton Black's rich new study, *Pico's* Heptaplus *and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), which deals with a variety of patristic, Neoplatonic, scholastic and cabbalistic sources (though not with Ficino whose influence on Pico was, I would argue, pervasive).

In a proem to the *Heptaplus* which is addressed to Lorenzo de' Medici, Pico observes that Moses "most loftily philosophizes on the emanation of all things from God, and on the grade, number, and order of the parts of the world,"[82] and that beneath "the rough bark [*rudi cortice*] of its words," Genesis, and preeminently its opening, has divine depths requiring interpretation by those who have achieved maturity of judgment, just as Jerome had declared in his fifty-third *Epistle*.[83] In the proem to the fourth exposition, Pico exults that "every mode of speech in the whole work includes such hidden senses and deep truths about human nature," just as it does about the worlds man inhabits.[84] He is anxious to assert, furthermore, not merely that Moses is a deep philosopher, but more particularly, first, that Genesis requires "a self-consistent and coherent course of interpretation," despite its apparent "perplexity, ambiguity and variety," for it is planned in such a way that it interprets "the entire creation of the world continuously and without confusion in not merely one but seven senses,"[85] and, second, that it does not assert "anything strange or wonderful or alien to the nature of things as they are observed, or to the truths ascertained by the better philosophers."[86] In the proem to the second exposition, Pico defines Moses's aim, "truly carried out with divine rather than human diligence," as follows: "to use terms and to arrange his discourse so that the same words, the same context, and the same order in the whole passage are completely suitable for symbolizing the secrets of all the worlds and of the whole of nature."[87] The first book of Moses, "which in the fewest words both fittingly and deeply encompasses all things as well as single things,"[88] thus becomes the model of all nature. Correspondingly, nature becomes an image of Genesis, and its single objects become images of the "fewest" words of Moses.

In the second general proem, Pico proceeds to outline the ancient philosophers' doctrine of the three worlds which he also finds in Genesis: the ultramundane or supercelestial world, "which the theologians call

[82] *Heptaplus*, general proem 1 (176 [71]).
[83] *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris: Garnier, 1844), 22:547.
[84] *Heptaplus*, proem 4 (268 [117]).
[85] *Heptaplus*, general proem 1 (180–2 [73–4]): "Secunda est difficultas, ut tenor idem sit interpretamenti sibi consentiens ex se aptus." See proem 5 (286 [127]). For a fascinating analysis of the work's structure, see Raymond B. Waddington, "The Sun at the Center: Structure as Meaning in Pico della Mirandola's *Heptaplus*," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 3 (1973): 69–86.
[86] Ibid.
[87] *Heptaplus*, proem 2 (222 [94–5]).
[88] Ibid.

the angelic and the philosophers call the intelligible world" of light and which is symbolized by fire; the celestial world of the stars and planets, of darkness and light together, which is symbolized by fire and water; and the sublunary world of darkness we inhabit, which is symbolized by water. Pico proceeds to assign eternal life and unchanging activity to the first, partaking as it does of the divine nature of mind; stability of life but change of activity and position to the second, partaking as it does of incorruptible body and of mind enslaved to that body; and perpetual alternation of life and death to the third, composed as it is of corruptible body. The third is moved by the second, while the second, whose outermost sphere is the prime mover, is governed by the first. But "these three worlds are one world" in that "whatever is in all the worlds together is also contained in each of the worlds separately."[89] Here, surely, Pico is invoking the two celebrated Neoplatonic formulas to the effect that the whole is in the part, though according to the capacity of the part, and that all things are in all things, though each in its own way or in a certain way. These formulas had been refined by Proclus in the belief that they were the key to our understanding of the unity of the world, of the oneness that makes the intelligible world a many and a one. For Pico continues, "Whatever is in the lower world is also in the higher ones, but of better stamp," and contrariwise "whatever is in the higher ones is also seen in the lowest but in a degenerate condition."[90] Thus our elemental world has the heat and fire which burns, while the celestial world has the heating power of the sun, which gives us life, and the supercelestial world has the Idea of heat, identified apparently with the love of the seraphic intellects. Similarly, what is water here is the Moon in the heavens and the understanding of the cherubic intellects in the supercelestial realm. The nine orders of the angels presided over by God's unmoving unity correspond to the nine revolving heavenly spheres presided over by the unmoving empyrean, and these correspond in turn to the nine spheres of ever-moving corruptible forms founded upon prime matter. These nine spheres are themselves divided into three triads. The three lowest spheres contain the four lifeless elements; things such as storms, which are unstably mixed; and other inanimate things that are stably mixed. The three vegetal spheres contain the three genera of grasses, shrubs, and trees. The

[89] *Heptaplus*, general proem 2 (188 [77]): "quicquid in omnibus simul est mundis, id et in singulis continetur." I have changed Carmichael's rendering here; see ibid., 194: "quae sunt in omnibus mundis contineri in singulis."

[90] Ibid. Cf. Black, *Pico's* Heptaplus, 164–6.

three spheres of sensitive beings contain imperfectly ensouled creatures such as zoophytes, lower animals governed solely by their irrational souls or fantasies, and higher animals capable of being instructed by man.[91]

Moreover, "bound by the chains of concord," writes Pico, "all these worlds exchange natures as well as names with mutual liberality."[92] Thus Nature herself is an allegory full of "hidden alliances and affinities" that enable an enlightened interpreter to work by way of the correspondences between the worlds.[93] By implication at least, Nature must also be riven by discord: countering every hidden alliance and affinity must be ruptures and oppositions. To every attraction of like to like – to invoke the ancient saw – there must be the corresponding repulsion of unlike from unlike. But such an Empedoclean vision seems to be foreign to Pico, perhaps because it is too dualistic. However divided our fallen world may be by the discord caused by a Helen or a Clytemnestra, the intelligible realm is governed by the concord of a Castor and Pollux, and in between are the conjunctions and oppositions that constitute the dance of the stars. Furthermore, we might have expected in the final, the sensitive, triad a division into zoophytes, beasts, and man rather than into zoophytes, lower animals, and higher animals. But Pico wants to postulate a separate, a fourth, world for man, in whom are found all those things in the three other worlds, the sublunar, the celestial, and the supercelestial.

Since the scripture of Moses is the "exact image of the world" and is arranged, as Exodus 25:40 had declared, "according to the pattern that God had shown him on the mountain,"[94] its every word can and must be interpreted in terms of the four worlds. Even so, a fifth kind of exposition is needed to explain how the natures are distinct and at the same time united "by a certain discordant concord" and knotted and linked together "by many kinds of interwoven chains," and a sixth kind is needed to explain the fifteen ways we can understand "how one thing is joined or related to another." Finally, Pico's interpretation comes to rest in a sabbatical exposition of "the felicity of all creatures and their return to God." For this book of Moses "is marked with the seven seals [*septem signaculis obsignatus*] and is full of all wisdom [*doctrina*] and of all mysteries."[95]

[91] *Heptaplus*, general proem 2 (188–90 [77–8]).
[92] *Heptaplus*, general proem 2 (192 [78–9]): "astricti vinculis concordiae uti naturas ita etiam appellationes hi omnes mundi mutua sibi liberalitate condonant."
[93] Ibid.
[94] *Heptaplus*, general proem 2 (192–4 [79]).
[95] *Heptaplus*, general proem 2 (194–6 [80–1]).

In short, although Pico is confronting the challenges of the Mosaic text, he is also confronting the challenges of reading the world as text, the challenges of what we now think of as science but which for him were those of Neoplatonic metaphysics and mythology. Since "whatever is in any of the worlds is contained in each," Moses, as an "imitator [*aemulator*] of nature" and in effect as an adept in allegoresis and correspondence theory, necessarily "had to treat of each of these worlds in such a way that in the same words and in the same context he could treat equally of all."[96] Transposed into a Platonic key, this means that each reading must pertain to, and hence explain, both sublunar nature and the translunar heavens and be at the same time fully consonant with a theological account of the angelic realm and the realm of Mind. An enlightened interpreter must move back and forth harmoniously, that is, between the realm of nature and that of theology. Moreover, a proper understanding of man, an enlightened anthropology, will be consonant with such a concomitant natural science and theology, and the three disciplines will share the same fundamental methodology and hermeneutics. A reading in one discipline will not only set up resonances in another but be keyed, by way of the isomorphic structure of the analogies established by God at the creation, to a particular parallel reading in that other discipline. While such a perspective looks back to the ancient theologians, it also looks forward as Pico searches for a unitary methodology, a way of explaining all phenomena, a theory of everything.

Pico's *Heptaplus* may first strike one, for all its boldness, as an essentially medieval work in which the theological concerns take precedence over a concern with the recalcitrant variety of the physical world, though this is very much the theme of the first exposition. Furthermore, like other medieval and indeed ancient texts, and like Pico's own *Commento*, as we have seen, its central engagement is with another authoritative text, in this case the Bible's opening verses. Pico first wants to understand Genesis and then things as they are now in the time after creation; hence his concern with authorial intention, with the intricacies of Moses's formal design, and with the problems of correct, including numerologically correct, interpretation. The *Heptaplus* is also original, however, in its turning aside to the Cabala and in its fashioning out of Genesis a Christological text (and by implication an anthropological or anthropocentric one) and thus articulating a human-dominated worldview, for the seventh chapter of each of the seven expositions turns to the Son of Man as the definitive "law," the key to all physics, to all metaphysics, to all

[96] *Heptaplus*, general proem 2 (194 [80]). See n. 86 above.

theologies, the first and the final cause. It is also remarkable as a *summa* presenting on the eve of the scientific revolution a cosmology governed by the principles of harmony, correspondence, and consonance. In doing so, it may be harking back to Boethius and Aristotle, but more obviously it is still drawing on Plato's Pythagorean themes and on their elaboration by the Neoplatonists, including Dionysius the Areopagite, whom Pico, like most Renaissance scholars, still assumed was the Athenian disciple of St. Paul mentioned in Acts 17:34.[97] The *Heptaplus* is in effect a triumph of Platonically inspired analysis.

One more particularly striking creation or succession question requires consideration here, given various modern indictments of what is often misinterpreted as Renaissance anthropocentrism. A naive reaction to the famous opening sections of Pico's *Oration*, as indeed to the verses of Genesis itself, might interpret God's injunction to the prelapsarian Adam as an injunction to postlapsarian mankind to use, to exploit, to conquer nature. Certainly, read out of context, the famous apostrophe suggests a special role for humanity. Caught between steadfast eternity and changing time, original "protoplastic" man was and is the cosmic chameleon, the "great wonder," "the messenger between creatures," "the interpreter of nature," the bond, yea "the nuptial knot of the world," the animal especially blessed, Proteus as he appeared in "the secret rites" of old. The speech reaches its climax in an injunction to Adam "to have that which he chooses and to be that which he wills" and thus to elect his own determination. Whereas other creatures, including the celestial planetary souls and the angelic intellects above them, have "natures" which confine them to a particular realm of being, the first made man is not so confined. As the "molder and maker of himself," he can sculpt himself into whatsoever form he pleases, be it that of a beast or a seraph.[98] Adam is thus destined to pass up and down the ladder of nature without being confined to any one ontological rung or level, and in this respect he is unique among God's creatures – autonomous, self-choosing, free, not bound to and yet at the very heart of the order of nature, a shape-changing sea god invested in the mystery and the majesty of ancient cult and worship.

We should remember, however, that this famous speech is subject to a variety of interpretations, depending on which ancient or even medieval source or sources one feels Pico had in the forefront of his mind, and

[97] Black, *Pico's* Heptaplus, 166–177, underscores the debt to the Pseudo-Areopagite.

[98] The Latin text can be found in *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno, e scritti vari*, 102–6.

depending too on one's familiarity with parallel if not identical formulations in the *Heptaplus* and the *Commento*. In 1.12 of the latter, Pico had already defined "human nature" as "the tie and knot of the world,"[99] being located in the middle of the ontological hierarchy, and had asserted that man "through his various parts has some relation or correspondence to every part of the world," first his body corresponding to the material realm; his second, vegetative part to the plant realm; his third, sensitive part to the irrational animals; his fifth, intellectual part to the angels; and his sixth part, his unity, to God himself. His fourth rational part is peculiar to himself, or at least peculiar to rational animals. These correspondences underlie the very notion of man the microcosm,[100] though the Platonists had disagreed as to whether all these parts were mortal, the radical position (i.e., that all man's parts were immortal) being espoused by Numenius and Plotinus.[101] Interestingly, Pico had been content in the *Commento* with the asymmetry that results from postulating six parts or powers of the soul, for what is peculiarly man's is not in the exact center of his being, is not the faculty that constitutes the median tie and knot of himself. Though he may be the bond of the world, his rational part is not, mathematically speaking at least, the bond of himself. At all events, the notion of man as the little world and by predication of the world (or World Soul, as Pico seems to suggest in 2.6) as the great man, the *macroanthropos*, has rather different implications for our understanding of man's relationship both to nature in general and to his own human nature than does the image of Proteus. And this despite the fact that the world as a great man is also an ancient trope and for Pico at least a Mosaic one (as his gematria-based epilogue on Genesis's opening *Bereshit* makes clear).[102] The twin tropes point, I suggest, to a more than intricate sense of man's belonging to the world in its plenitude and continuity and it to him – of his being simultaneously its every part and its every part being him. No longer just a mirror that simply reflects the world's ontological levels or a Proteus that can swim or slither through them, man is not even a fourth world but "the bond and union of the other three," and his substance "encompasses by its very essence the substance of all natures

[99] See Engelbert Monnerjahn, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Ein Beitrag zur philosophischen Theologie des italienischen Humanismus* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1960), 15–25.

[100] See Rudolf Allers, "Microcosmus: From Anaximandros to Paracelsus," *Traditio* 2 (1944), 319–407.

[101] *Commento* 1.12 (478–9 [91–2]).

[102] *Heptaplus, expositio primae dictionis* (380 [173]). See Black, *Pico's Heptaplus*, pp. 214–232, on Bereshit and the Sabbath.

and the fullness of the whole universe." Thus, if "God contains all things in Himself as their origin, man contains all things in himself as their center."[103]

This vision of man as "a great miracle" – and Pico again cites the famous expostulation from the Hermetic *Asclepius* – flows inevitably into a Christology. "Just as man is the absolute perfection of all lower things, so is Christ the absolute perfection of all men."[104] He is "the first born of all creation,"[105] the statue in the center of the city, in the striking image at the beginning of 5.6.[106] If Mosaic man is angelic only in an allegorical sense[107] – since the scriptures often use man, writes Pico in 2.6, to represent all angelic and rational creatures, "not because he is an angel but because he is the end and terminus of the angelic world," as Psalm 8:6 declares – then Christ as man, as the "newest Adam,"[108] is more eminent than the first angel: indeed, he perfects the angels.[109] In turn, he enables us to become more than the angels – to become, as Paul exults in Hebrews 1:4, not just the image and likeness but the sons of God.[110]

The trope of the human microcosm haunted Ficino too, though he was most drawn to the image of man's standing on the middle rung of the cosmic ladder, for insofar as man is soul, he is a participant in the realm or hypostasis of Soul, which is the middle and therefore mediating hypostasis in the pentadic scheme of hypostases Ficino inherited from Proclus and the late ancient Neoplatonic tradition, the scheme of the One, Mind, Soul, Quality, and Body (i.e., matter in extension).[111] Man as soul thus serves as the marriage knot, the nuptial copula of the world, mediating between the intelligible realm of Mind and the corporeal realm of sensible qualities. But his mediating role derives not from his being a particular entity or species, or even from his being the little-world-man, for arguably every creature is a necessary link in the hierarchical continuum, but rather from his being a part of, a participant in, Soul and

[103] *Heptaplus* 5.6 (302 [135]): "quod Deus in se omnia continet uti omnium principium, homo autem in se omnia continet uti omnium medium."
[104] *Heptaplus* 1.7 (220 [92]).
[105] *Heptaplus* 5.7 (308 [137]).
[106] *Heptaplus* 5.6 (300 [134]).
[107] *Heptaplus* 2.6 (240 [103]).
[108] *Heptaplus* 4.7 (286 [125–6]).
[109] *Heptaplus* 3.7 (266 [115–16]).
[110] *Heptaplus* 6.7 (324 [145]).
[111] See my "Ficino's Theory of the Five Substances and the Neoplatonists' *Parmenides*," now in my *Plato's Third Eye: Studies in Marsilio Ficino's Metaphysics and Its Sources* (Aldershot, England: Variorum, 1995), chap. 8.

thus a participant in the World Soul, which is the prime instance of Soul (and in a cosmological context the Neoplatonists often equated the two). Once again this implies an even greater recognition of connectedness than the microcosm trope allows, let alone the notion of man as Proteus, and it underscores the complexity and profundity of the Renaissance Neoplatonists' anthropology and cosmology alike and of their several and sometimes contrasting perspectives on nature, man in nature, and nature in man.

Ficino's emphasis on Soul and thus on the World Soul directs our attention away from the notion of particular entities and species toward the general concepts of life, of potentiality, of being, and specifically of being part of a greater whole while reflecting the whole in the part which is ourselves. Pico's Platonic anthropocentrism by contrast, along with his commitment to the Genesis myths of man's creation, serves in a way to underscore the uniqueness of man, and certainly of man in Christ and of Christ as the Idea of Man,[112] and it lends its Christological force to the notion that the world itself is a great man. Ficino's vision may be in a way more unitary, more panentheistic, since his metaphysics is attuned to his abiding fascination with harmony, with the antiphonal and responsive play of voices in the choir of creation, with the counterturns of the cosmic dance, and it looks, as we still do, to mathematics and particularly to the key notions of ratio and proportion as the initiatory discipline for our entry into this choir, into this starry dance. Indeed, this originally musical concern is arguably his most arresting imaginative legacy and makes him one of the Renaissance harbingers of our modern commitment to discovering fundamental and mutually corroborative and interacting laws, laws that are now the preoccupation of particle physics and astrophysics alike.

Pico's contribution, however, is interesting for different reasons. He has given us a rich, if not an internally consistent, set of speculations concerning the principles of the emanative process itself: the principles that underlie the birth of thought, of the world, of beauty, of love, of humanity, of Adam, of ourselves as particular beings, of ourselves in Christ as the Son of Man, and of God. Many of the problems that he encountered and that prevented him from arriving at consistency are demonstrably intrinsic

[112] See my "Cultura Hominis: Giovanni Pico, Marsilio Ficino and the Idea of Man," in *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Convegno internazionale di studi nel cinquecentesimo anniversario della morte (1494–1994), Mirandola 4–8 ottobre 1994*, ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini (Florence: Olschki, 1997), 173–96.

to Neoplatonism itself and to Plotinus's iterated attempts to probe not so much into the genesis moment as into the emanative moment: the first flowing out of the One, the first manifestation of the dyad, whether or not this dyad is coincident with being or is already becoming. After all, this is the mystery investing the very idea that anything, let alone everything, exists, and it haunts us still as physicists, as cosmologists, as metaphysicians, as theologians. Certainly it haunted the Florentine disciples of Plotinus, who believed with him that this mystery had once been comprehended fully by Moses and by Plato and, in part at least, by the ancient theologians who preceded Plato and by the line of prophets who succeeded Moses. This fascination with the origin of existence, with the origin of the very thought of what does not yet exist in thought, constitutes for Pico and Ficino, I would argue, the fundamental allure of Plotinian Platonism. In particular, it accounts for Pico's most enduring and interesting contributions as a speculative philosopher and as one of the age's subtlest exegetes of what he invariably sees as the Platonic and Mosaic mysteries enveloped in the veils of ancient myth, divine hymn, and poetic invocation. In this important regard at least, we should continue to think of him as Ficino's fellow Neoplatonist, however Aristotelian or eclectic he may have been in many other respects; certainly he joined his older friend, however contentiously, in celebrating philosophically the birthday of Venus.

6

Three Precursors to Pico della Mirandola's Roman Disputation and the Question of Human Nature in the *Oratio*

M. V. Dougherty

One may be tempted to regard Pico's grand proposal for a public defense of his collection of 900 theses as an unprecedented episode in the history of intellectual endeavors.[1] At twenty-three years of age, the young philosopher envisioned himself at the center of an elaborate disputation to be held in Rome in early 1487 before an audience comprising the pope, the College of Cardinals, and scholars brought at his expense from major centers of learning.[2] According to some accounts, Pico is nothing less than an unprecedented *sui generis* Renaissance prodigy who thought his Roman disputation would uniquely herald the Second Coming. One commentator references such interpretations by asking, "Did Pico believe that his Vatican debate would end with the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse crashing through the Roman skies . . . ? It is impossible to know

[1] The Latin text for Pico's *Oratio* cited below is from Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oratio de hominis dignitate*, ed. Eugenio Garin (Pordenone: Edizioni Studio Tesi, 1994). This volume reproduces with some emendations the text originally edited by Garin in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno, e Scritti vari* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1942), 101–65. The translations of the *Oratio* are my own, though I have consulted existing translations. The text and translation of the *900 Theses* are taken from S. A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486)* (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998), 210–553. References to individual theses from this work are cited by the page number of this edition. The Latin text for the *Heptaplus* is taken from *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno, e Scritti vari*, 167–383. Other Latin texts by Pico, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the Basel 1572 edition of the *Opera*, reprinted as Joannes Picus Mirandulanus, *Opera omnia* (Turin: Bottega D'Erasmo, 1971). The text and translation of Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola's *Vita* are taken from "Appendix A" found in Thomas More, *English Poems, Life of Pico, The Last Things*, vol. 1 of *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, ed. Anthony S. G. Edwards et al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 294–341.

[2] For the details of the proposed Roman debate, see Giovanni Di Napoli, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola e la problematica dottrinale del suo tempo* (Roma: Desclée & Co., 1965), 81–137, and Farmer, *Syncretism*, 1–58.

for sure."[3] Nevertheless, it is still possible to locate Pico's ambitious proposal within three traditions that render the event more conventional than one might initially suspect. Without denying that some elements of novelty surrounded Pico's Roman proposal, I would like to suggest that the event was intended to imitate three well-established academic models: the medieval university tradition of the *quaestiones disputatae*, the tradition of collecting and commenting on *sententiae*, and the practice of Aristotelian-style dialectical interpretation. Having shown that Pico's proposal should be viewed as a distinctive Renaissance continuation of these three academic exercises, I shall argue that a failure to recognize these traditions has led at times to an exaggerated view of Pico's project and aims and, more seriously, to some unusual renderings of his philosophical positions, especially his views on human nature.

To this end, the paper is divided into six parts. In parts I to III, I locate Pico's Roman proposal within the three traditional academic exercises identified above. I then turn, in part IV, to Pico's discussion of human nature in the *Oratio*, the celebrated introductory speech that was to open Pico's defense of his theses.[4] Although the *Oratio* is arguably the best-known text of Renaissance philosophy, its views on human nature have been subject to seemingly innumerable and conflicting interpretations.[5]

[3] Farmer, *Syncretism*, 44. Also, Farmer contends, "Pico's plans for his debate uniformly suggest eschatological hopes and apocalyptic urgency" (43). For a speculative reading of Pico's proposal for the Roman debate replete with eschatological overtones, see Dennis Costa, "Stuck Sow or Broken Heart: Pico's *Oratio* as Ritual Sacrifice," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 12 (1982): 221–35.

[4] A shorter redaction of Pico's *Oratio* was published by Eugenio Garin in his *La cultura filosofica del Rinascimento Italiano* (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1961), 233–40. Although Garin argued that this text, taken from MS Palatino 885 in the Biblioteca Nationale Centrale di Firenze, was an earlier redaction of the *princeps editio* of the *Oratio* printed in the 1496 *Opera*, this interpretation has recently been called into question by Francesco Bausi in his *Nec rhetor neque philosophus: Fonti, lingua e stile nelle prime opera latine de Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1484–87)* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1996), 93–118. All references to the *Oratio* below are to Pico's longer version of the work, in concurrence with Paul Oskar Kristeller's estimation that the earlier version "contains a few striking phrases of its own but does not differ from the final version in its basic content." See "The Dignity of Man," *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, ed. Michael Mooney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 169–81, at 174.

[5] The scholarly literature dealing with Pico's views on human nature in the *Oratio* is vast, and a number of studies are discussed below. An important historiographical monograph that is critical of the many ways commentators have approached Pico's work is William G. Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Symbol of His Age: Modern Interpretations of a Renaissance Philosopher* (Geneva: Libraire Droz, 1981). For a more recent historiographical assessment of contemporary literature, see Brian P. Copenhaver, "Magic and the Dignity of Man: De-Kanting Pico's *Oration*," in *The Italian Renaissance in the Twentieth*

I review the various approaches to the philosophical anthropology that commentators have found in the *Oratio*, and then, in part V, I suggest that the theme of deification unifies the seemingly disparate subjects of the work. Throughout my interpretation, I contend that the context of the threefold traditional background that sustains Pico's proposed Roman debate contains a key to understanding the philosophical anthropology defended in the *Oratio*. In part VI, I discuss the early reception of Pico's *Oratio*.

I. Disputatio

Pico's first published work, the *900 Theses*, was printed by the Roman publisher Eucharius Silber in late 1486 in anticipation of the planned disputation, to be held early the following year. In an advertisement appended to the *editio princeps* version of the theses, Pico referred to himself as a master who will dispute (*Dominus disputaturus*) and generously offered to pay the expenses of any philosopher or theologian who desired to travel from the extremes of Italy to participate in the debate.[6] Copies of the theses circulated as far as Florence among Marsilio Ficino's intellectual circle, but it is difficult to discern how widely available the theses were to those in the farther reaches of Italy and Europe. Nevertheless, Pico understood the event to be one in which learned men would participate. Rather than merely presenting an intellectual soliloquy, Pico envisioned an exercise to involve the finest minds in Europe, and he was willing to concede, at least in principle, that he might be bested in the event.[7]

The disputation was to involve a clashing of philosophical and theological views on the topics enumerated in the published theses, to the extent that Pico's nephew, Gianfrancesco Pico, could refer to his uncle's planned Roman debate as an *altercatio*.[8] In the posthumously published *Oratio*, Pico

Century, ed. Allen J. Grieco et al. (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2002), 295–320. See also Leonardo Quaquarelli, "Le edizioni dell' Ottocento e del Novecento e gli studi," in *Pichiana: Bibliografia delle edizioni e degli studi*, ed. Leonardo Quaquarelli and Zita Zanardi (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2005), 65–77.

[6] The advertisement in the original edition of 1486 is reprinted in Farmer, *Syncretism*, vii, 552, and Quaquarelli and Zanardi, *Pichiana*, 147. For a discussion, see Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 209–10, and Eugenio Garin, "Introduzione," in *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno, e Scritti vari*, 1–60, at 19.

[7] See *Oratio*, 48.

[8] *Vita*, 298.

himself used the terms *disputatio*,[9] *congressus*,[10] and *bellum*[11] to describe the proposed event. Despite the adversarial connotation of at least some of these terms, there is evidence that Pico viewed his debate to be a traditional – rather than unprecedented – exercise among the learned. To begin with, Pico's intention was to tell his gathered opponents that their reputations had been built upon disputations like the present one,[12] and in the short preface of the *900 Theses*, he contended that in setting forth his theses he had imitated the widely used mode of the most illustrious Parisian disputers,[13] a claim he repeated later in the *Apologia*.[14] Further, in the *Oratio* Pico lamented a contemporary attitude of opposition to disputation in general and public disputation in particular, and he predicted – accurately, it turned out – that such prejudicial sentiments would cause some to oppose his Roman plans in principle.[15] Such admissions from the *Oratio* at least indicate that Pico saw his proposed debate to be in line with standard academic disputations of his day. External evidence confirms this view. In his *Vita*, Gianfrancesco Pico noted that the theses were set out in a bold and unqualified manner, "as is customary in disputations" (*disceptandarum more*).[16] Even in the papal condemnation of the content of Pico's *900 Theses*, Innocent VIII noted that Pico had proposed to defend his theses "as is customary" (*ut moris est*).[17] Similarly, Alexander VI could speak of people "who are accustomed to flock to public disputations of this sort" (*qui ad huiusmodi publicas disputationes confluere solent*) in his papal rehabilitation of Pico after the condemnation by Innocent VIII.[18]

[9] E.g., *Oratio*, 42.
[10] *Oratio*, 46, 80.
[11] *Oratio*, 46.
[12] See *Oratio*, 44.
[13] See *900 Theses*, 211.
[14] *Opera omnia*, 175.
[15] See *Oratio*, 42.
[16] *Vita*, 300. On Gianfrancesco Pico's *Vita* and his complex disposition to his uncle, see Charles B. Schmitt, "Gianfrancesco Pico's Attitude toward his Uncle," in *L' opera e il pensiero di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola nella storia dell'Umanismo* (Florence: Nella Sede dell'Instituto, 1965), 2:305–13, and Farmer, *Syncretism*, 153–76. See also the recent work of Gian Mario Cao, "Pico della Mirandola Goes to Germany, with an Edition of Gianfrancesco Pico's *De Reformandis moribus oratio*," *Annali dell' Instituto storico italo-germanico in Trento* 30 (2004): 463–526.
[17] Innocent VIII's *Damnatio propositionum Ioannis Pico* can be found in *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno, e scritti vari*, 63–6, cited text on 63.
[18] Alexander VI's 1493 papal document was printed after the title page of the *Opera*. Modern editions containing the Latin text of the document include Di Napoli, *Giovanni Pico*, 116–7, cited text on 116, and W. Parr Greswell, *Memoirs of Angelus Politianus, Joannes Picus of Mirandula*, et al., 2nd ed. (Manchester: Cadell and Davies, 1805), 242–5.

In short, it appears that Pico and his contemporaries viewed the proposal for a public disputation to be at least procedurally consonant with other disputations of the day.

It is tempting to consider Pico as engaged in a late form of a standard medieval university debate, since Gianfrancesco appears to take seriously his uncle's claim to have planned the Roman project as "a scholastic exercise in the matter of the schools" (*scolasticamque exercitationem more academiarum*).[19] Perhaps following Gianfrancesco's traditional assessment of the planned Roman debate, several commentators have maintained that the debate should be viewed as a continuation of the custom of the medieval disputation of *quaestiones quodlibetales* (quodlibetal questions).[20] Quodlibetal disputations, which came to prominence at least by the early thirteenth century at the University of Paris and later gained popularity in other European centers of learning, including Oxford and Rome, were unscripted public debates in which topics for discussion concerning anything (*de quolibet*) could be brought forward by anyone (*a quolibet*) in attendance.[21] The oral debate would be refined and then written down, and many such exercises are extant from the masters of the quodlibet, including Thomas Aquinas, Giles of Rome, and Duns Scotus. The question must be asked, however, whether Pico's proposed Roman disputation

[19] *Vita*, 302. Gianfrancesco Pico appears to be paraphrasing Pico's own later account of his Roman plans set forth in the *Apologia*, where Pico maintained that he had conceived of the event as an *exercitatio scholastica*; see *Opera omnia*, 327.

[20] In describing Pico's plans for a Roman debate, Kristeller speaks of "the scholastic tradition of the *disputationes de quolibet*, which he was following." See his "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and His Sources," in *L' opera e il pensiero di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola nella storia dell'Umanismo* (Florence: Nella Sede dell'Instituto, 1965), 1:35–84, at 60. Farmer also places Pico's plans in the tradition of the quodlibetal disputation, mentioning "a perverted late form of the medieval quodlibet, to whose popularity Pico unwittingly contributed," where "itinerant scholars would sometimes appear at court or in university towns ready to debate any question with anybody" (*Syncretism*, 6). Brian P. Copenhaver and Charles Schmitt place the *Oratio* in the genre of academic inaugural oratory and consider the *900 Theses* to be "related to the quodlibetal disputations that permitted medieval scholars to debate any topic of their choice." Copenhaver and Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 166. See also Bohdan Kieszkowski, "Introduction," in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Conclusiones sive Theses DCCCC Romae anno 1486 publice disputandae sed non admissae*, ed. Bohdan Kieszkowski (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1973), 1–26, at 8.

[21] See John W. Wippel, "Quodlibetal Questions, Chiefly in Theology Faculties," in *Les questions disputées et les questions quodlibétiques dans les facultés de théologie, de droit et de medicine*," ed. Bernardo Bazàn et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 1985), 151–222, at 165–6, and, more recently, Jacqueline Hamesse, "Theological *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*," in *Theological Quodlibeta in the Middle Ages: The Thirteenth Century*, ed. Christopher Schabel (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 1:17–48, at 42.

fulfills the minimal conditions that would warrant designating it as a late continuation of the medieval exercise of quodlibetal questions.

Even though Pico used the term *quaestiones* to refer to his theses in the *Oratio*, a practice reaffirmed by Gianfrancesco in his account of his uncle's Roman affair, there are some strong reasons to place Pico's planned defense of *900 Theses* outside the tradition of the medieval quodlibetal question.[22] Rather, there is compelling evidence that it falls within the tradition of another kind of medieval disputation, that of the disputed question (*quaestio disputata*). Unlike their quodlibetal counterparts, disputed questions centered on subjects set out and determined in advance.[23] In this way, the subject matter of disputed questions was restricted by the prior announcement of the topics to be debated.[24] It is notable that in the *Oratio* as well as in the *Apologia* Pico sought to assuage those who might take offense at the large number of his theses by pointing out that his proposal involved theses that were "fixed and limited" (*certis et determinatis*), presumably with respect to both the number of propositions and the subject matter they suggested.[25] Pico may explicitly have had in mind the debaters of quodlibetal questions when he separated himself from those of his age who, in the manner of the ancient rhetorician Gorgias, were willing to propose disputations "concerning all the arts" (*de omnibus etiam omnium artium*) rather than any finite number of propositions.[26] In sum, the fact that Pico announced and distributed his theses prior to the anticipated debate and that he stressed the limited subject matter of his proposal precludes the inclusion of his proposed Roman debate within the tradition of the *quaestiones quodlibetales*. Rather, I argue, Pico's

[22] For the characterization of the theses as *quaestiones*, see *Oratio*, 44, 48, 50, etc., and *Vita*, 299, 300, 302.

[23] Leonard E. Boyle explains that "the *Quodlibet* or *Quaestio de quolibet* was an open, 'free for all,' debate in which the questions discussed were not, as in the *Questio disputata*, announced and specified beforehand but were put at random from the floor on the day of the debate." "The Quodlibets of St. Thomas and Pastoral Care," *The Thomist* 37 (1974): 232–56, at 232.

[24] Pico's eagerness in promulgating his *900 Theses* in advance of the Roman debate appears to have been particularly at issue in eliciting the ire of Innocent VIII, who in his papal bull condemning the debate complained that Pico "posted publicly 900 theses of various subjects in diverse public places of our favorable city, in which we reside with the Roman Curia, having caused them to be published publicly in other parts of the world" (*non-ingentas Conclusiones variorum facultatum publice affigi et in diversis locis publicis almae urbis, in qua cum Romana Curia residemus, et aliis mundi partibus publicare fecisset*). See *Damnatio propositionum Ioannis Pico*, 63.

[25] *Oratio*, 50; *Opera omnia*, 117.

[26] *Oratio*, 50.

proposal to defend his *900 Theses* establishes him in the tradition of the *quaestiones disputatae*.

II. Sententiae

Locating Pico's proposed disputation of theses within the genre of disputed questions does not, however, exhaust its historical placement in the range of traditional intellectual exercises, since, as a published work, the *900 Theses* is arguably part of a well-established form of writing known as "sentence collecting." Pico's text may be profitably approached as a late reappearance of the ancient and medieval genre of *florilegia* writing, where collected snippets or *sententiae* from authoritative sources were organized topically – or in Pico's case, by author and tradition.[27] The vast array of sources that Pico compiled in his collection is staggering; his unusual command of languages, joined with his bibliophilic tendencies, no doubt motivated him to produce a collection of sentences whose subject matter largely transcended the normal discipline and source-material boundaries of standard sentence collections. His diverse education in Bologna, Ferrara, Padua, and Paris, joined with his scholarly contacts in Florence, certainly prepared him for his compendium of wide-ranging theses. In the preface to the *900 Theses*, Pico is not sparing in describing the sources of his theses, and his lengthy description can serve as a taxonomy of the subjects and sources of his book.[28] It appears that the *900 Theses* was not Pico's first attempt at producing a collection of sentences, for Gianfrancesco Pico reports in his *Vita* that as young student of canon law Pico compiled "a sort of epitome or digest" (*epitomen quandam seu brevarium*) of decretals.[29] As a collector of sentences, Pico was certainly aware of his predecessors, since his library was replete with the text of and commentaries on the most famous of all *sententiae* collections, Peter Lombard's twelfth-century work, *Sententiae in IV libris distinctae*.[30]

[27] For a description of Renaissance *florilegia*, see John F. D'Amico, "Manuscripts," in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Charles Schmitt et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 11–24, at 16.

[28] *900 Theses*, 210. Although Pico designated the last 500 of his theses as theses "according to his own opinion" (*secundum opinionem propriam*), he qualified his endorsement of any of them by stating that he would approve none of them either "assertively or probably" (*assertive vel probabiliter*) until they received the approbation of the Church and Pope Innocent VIII. See *900 Theses*, 364.

[29] *Vita*, 298.

[30] See Pearl Kibre, *The Library of Pico della Mirandola* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936; rep., New York: AMS Press, 1966), §§178, 425, 644, 1389, 1395, 1500. Kibre underscores Lombard's influence on Pico's library and thought (65).

The compilation and publication of the *900 Theses*, I contend, firmly establishes Pico in a long tradition of producing *sententiae* collections.

Although the practice of commenting on *sententiae* is often largely understood to be a medieval academic exercise, perhaps because the commentators on Lombard's collection included such well-known medieval figures such as Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Scotus, it should be remembered that this academic exercise was sufficiently established in the sixteenth century to warrant a commentary by Martin Luther.[31] The replacement of Lombard's *Sententiae* with Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* as a standard university text would occur later in this same century, perhaps motivated by a Counter-Reformation desire to champion the thought of Aquinas as a remedy for Protestantism.[32] Nevertheless, the practice of commenting on sentences appears to have been sufficiently common in the time of Pico and not yet viewed as an outdated exercise. Whether Pico would have published a version of his oral commentary on and defense of his *900 Theses* had the disputation not been prohibited is uncertain. Pico did publish a partial commentary on his *900 Theses*, insofar as his *Apologia* focused on the thirteen theses identified by the papal commission as suspect of various degrees of heresy. Commentaries on the *900 Theses* by others in the late fifteenth century and sixteenth century followed, and some were of a critical nature.[33]

The question can be raised whether Pico envisioned the publication of the *900 Theses* to be part of any educational program apart from the event of the disputation in Rome. It need not be assumed that Pico's desire to have it disseminated "in all universities" (*in omnibus Italiae*

[31] See *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesammtausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1893), 9:28–94.

[32] See Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Thomism and the Italian Thought of the Renaissance," in *Medieval Aspects of Renaissance Learning: Three Essays*, ed. and trans. Edward P. Mahoney (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1974), 27–91, 40–1, 90–1; Marcia L. Colish, *Peter Lombard* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 1:4; and Philipp Rosemann, *Peter Lombard* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3.

[33] For a discussion of Petrus Garsia's 1489 *Determinationes magistrales contra Conclusiones apologiales Ioannis Pici*, see Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, 52–6; Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Experimental Science*, vol. 4, *Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), 497–507; Henri de Lubac, *Pic de la Mirandole: Études et discussions* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1974), 403–11; and Di Napoli, *Giovanni Pico*, 175–87. For a discussion of Arcangelo da Borgonovo's 1564 *Apologia pro Ioanne Pico Mirandulano contra Petrum Garziam*, see Thorndike, *History of Experimental Science*, 507. For a comparison of the commentaries by Francesco Giorgio and Borgonovo, see Chaim Wirszubski, "Francesco Giorgio's Commentary on Giovanni Pico's Kabbalistic Theses," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 37 (1974): 145–56. The papal commission's documents on Pico's *900 Theses* are published in *Pic de la Mirandole in France (1485–1488)*, ed. Léon Dorez and Louis Thuasne (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1897), 114–46.

Gymnasiis)[34] and "other parts of the world" (*aliis mundi partibus*)[35] was merely for the sake of drawing scholars to dispute in Rome. Indeed, much of the book can be considered as a reference volume comprising authoritative quotations or paraphrases from standard (as well as novel) authorities. In a text from the *Oratio* that is also repeated in the *Apologia*, Pico succinctly summarizes the contents of the theses by dividing them into three classes: (1) the sublime mysteries of Christian theology, (2) the highest topics of philosophy, and (3) certain unexplored disciplines.[36] The third group presumably concerns the texts taken from Hebrew Kabbalah and other sources that Pico attempted to disclose to a wider audience. That Pico's *900 Theses* could be seen as a handbook divided thematically across the three divisions of philosophy, theology, and unexplored disciplines might indicate a possible educational program intended to be advanced by publication of the theses. It seems improbable that one day's disputation in Rome could have sufficed to debate the *900 Theses*, although Pico may have intended the debate to last much longer.[37] It is possible that the publication and dissemination of the *900 Theses* may have been more significant in eliciting papal ire than the proposal of a disputation itself. Indeed, it has been claimed that the papal prohibition of the *900 Theses* represents the first time that a book was prohibited universally by the Roman Church. In the words of one historian, "This is the first broad inquisitorial action in the history of printing, heralding the promulgations of the *indices librorum prohibitorum*."[38]

When viewed as a collection of *sententiae*, the book of *900 Theses* purports to lay out authoritative views on the subject discussed in each thesis. Pico used a variety of technical terms to refer to the theses composing his collection, and it is instructive to examine his nomenclature. First, in the *Oratio*, Pico employed the term *sententiae* to refer to his theses, thereby appealing to a standard term familiar to those versed in the tradition of

[34] *900 Theses*, 553.

[35] This text is from Innocent VIII's 1487 *Damnatio propositionum Ioannis Pico*, 63.

[36] See *Oratio*, 42; *Opera omnia*, 115.

[37] Farmer is correct in stating that the "projected length of the debate is uncertain, but we do know that Pico planned to spend the full winter of 1486–1487 in Rome and that he transferred most of his large household and library there for the project" (*Syncretism*, 3). Gianfrancesco Pico's statement that Pico waited in Rome for a day (*dies*) to be set for the disputation need not be understood to mean that the debate would *only* last one day (*Vita*, 298).

[38] Rudolf Hirsch, *Printing, Selling and Reading: 1450–1550* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Otto Harrassowitz, 1967), 89.

sentence collecting.[39] Second, as was noted above, Pico used the term *quaestiones* to designate his theses, perhaps in deference to the *quaestiones disputatae* tradition. Third, both in the *Oratio* and in the preface to the *900 Theses*, Pico described his theses as *placita*.[40] This term carries the strong sense of "authoritative opinion," as it is the Latin cognate of the Greek term *areskonta*, meaning "dogmas."[41] Since compendia of statements of ancient philosophers in some notable cases were titled *De placitis*, Pico appears to establish himself in the ancient tradition of philosophical florilegists by styling his theses as *placita*.[42] A fourth term used by Pico to refer to his theses is *propositiones*. The employment of this term may be surprising, at least insofar as a great many of Pico's theses are not short simple propositions but rather brief disquisitions on a particular subject, sometimes comprising more than one grammatical sentence. A fifth term used once by Pico to refer to his theses is *opiniones*, a stock term of the dialectical tradition, which will be discussed below.[43] A sixth term appearing in the preface to the *900 Theses* and throughout the *Oratio* is *dogmata*, which at times is synonymous with *opiniones* but can have the stronger senses of "doctrines."[44] Lastly, the most common term Pico employs to refer to his theses is *conclusiones*. Although not used in the *Oratio*, the term appears in each of the chapter headings throughout the *900 Theses* as well as in the advertisement printed in the original 1486 edition mentioned above. Pico's use of *conclusiones* seems fitting within the context of a debate, since Pico's confidence in his ability to give some form of defense of each thesis would suggest that premises can be adduced in support of each thesis.[45] In sum, at least two of the seven main terms that Pico uses to refer to his theses strongly support placing Pico in the tradition of sentence collection: *sententiae* and *placita*. The other terms are significant for the reasons mentioned above, and thus collectively Pico's

[39] *Oratio*, 58.

[40] *Oratio*, 54; *900 Theses*, 210.

[41] For a discussion of this term, see the philological study of Bausi, *Nec rhetor neque philosophus*, 130.

[42] Perhaps the best known ancient examples are pseudo-Plutarch's epitome of early Greek philosophy called *De placitis philosophorum* and Galen's handbook *De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis*.

[43] *Oratio*, 56.

[44] *900 Theses*, 210.

[45] Of Pico's use of the term *quaestiones*, one commentator notes, "Enfin, et c'est là un point important, il faut remarquer que Pic a présenté ses '*thèses*' non seulement sous forme de '*quaestiones*,' mais déjà sous la forme de positions définies, énoncées dans les termes mêmes que leurs différents auteurs avaient retenus; bref, sous la forme de thèses '*conclusiones*' au sens propre du mot" (Kieszkowski, "Introduction," 9).

terminology is an aid to discerning the genres of historical intellectual exercises of which the proposed Roman debate appears to partake.

III. Dialectica

There is general agreement among scholars that Pico's proposed disputation of his theses can be fittingly described in some sense as an exercise in dialectic. Indeed, Pico's early apologists attempted to identify his difficulties with the Church as arising from a love of dialectics rather than any intrinsic orientation toward heresy.[46] Medieval dialectic had its ancestry in Aristotelian dialectic, which was in general terms the procedure of reasoning that used authoritative opinions as premises or starting points.[47] Indeed, Pico is not parsimonious in the *Oratio* in naming the standard philosophical and theological authorities he has consulted from various traditions in preparation for his Roman plans.[48] Aristotle's *Topica*, a handbook for dialectical reasoning, circulated widely in the Latin West beginning in the twelfth century, and Pico's library included both the Greek and Latin versions of this important text.[49] Admittedly, the understanding of dialectical procedure and the precise rules governing dialectical debates evolved significantly from the time of Aristotle through Pico's time, so it would be hasty to conclude that Pico intended to follow the early Aristotelian procedure strictly. Pico's involvement in a number of debates in his lifetime testifies to the variety of dialectical debating formats then available as well as to his continued desire to participate in such events.[50] There is considerable evidence supporting the placement

[46] See John F. D'Amico, "Paolo Cortesi's Rehabilitation of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 44 (1982): 37–51, at 44–5, and John F. D'Amico, *Renaissance Humanism in Papal Rome: Humanists and Churchmen on the Eve of the Reformation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 164.

[47] See Eleonore Stump, *Dialectic and Its Place in the Development of Medieval Logic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 11–30.

[48] See, e.g., *Oratio*, 52–6.

[49] See Kibre, *The Library of Pico*, §§389, 1127, 1619, 1654.

[50] Pico's failed Roman plans apparently did not quell his desire for debating, although Gianfrancesco Pico contended that Pico came to prefer nonpublic debates as he matured (*Vita*, 318). For Pico's involvement in a June 1489 theological debate in Florence concerning issues of theodicy and the sin of Adam, see Jill Kraye, "Lorenzo and the Philosophers," in *Lorenzo the Magnificent: Culture and Politics*, ed. Michael Mallett and Nicholas Mann (London: Warburg Institute, 1996), 151–66, at 156, 158, 163. For Pico's celebrated debate with Cajetan de Vio at the general chapter of the Dominicans in Ferrara in May 1494, see Gianfrancesco Pico, *Vita*, 316–18, and Di Napoli, *Giovanni Pico*, 237. Ficino reports a lively debate that Pico held at his house concerning the question of whether Christ

of Pico within the tradition of dialectical inquiry. As mentioned above, Pico employs the term *opiniones* to refer to his theses in the *Oratio*, and the standard technique of dialectical argumentation is a consideration of reputable opinions.[51] Pico is clear that he viewed dialectic as a procedure for adjudicating among seemingly conflicting authoritative opinions within the discipline of philosophy. Since Pico remarks at length in the *Oratio* on his understanding of dialectic, his comments there can help elucidate how he understood his intended dialectical defense of the *900 Theses*.

Pico broaches the subject of dialectic in a substantive portion of the *Oratio* that sets forth a tripartite philosophical program that Pico contends will prepare one for the higher discipline of theology. The three subdisciplines of this philosophical curriculum are identified as moral philosophy (*philosophia moralis*, *scientia moralis*), dialectic (*dialectica*), and philosophy of nature (*philosophia naturae*, *philosophia naturalis*). Pico presents the three disciplines as the hierarchically ordered components of philosophical curriculum that prepare one for sacred theology.[52] Pico's account of the first discipline, moral philosophy, seems to be premised on a version of Socratic ethical intellectualism, since he suggests that the study of moral philosophy suffices for perfection in the moral life.[53] At length, Pico lays out the view that moral philosophy can curb the passions, calm desires,

was the fulfillment of the messianic prophesies of the Hebrew scriptures. Participants included Hebrew scholar Elijah del Medigo and the convert Flavius Mithradites, two scholars to whom Pico was indebted for help with his Hebrew studies. For a discussion, see Kraye, "Lorenzo and the Philosophers," 166, and Shlomo Simonsohn, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola on Jews and Judaism," in *From Witness to Witchcraft: Jews and Judaism in Medieval Christian Thought*, ed. Jeremy Cohen (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996), 403–17, at 417. For Pico's participation in a debate on the relationship between theology and philosophy, see Di Napoli, *Giovanni Pico*, 216. Di Napoli also discusses the 1479 debate with Leonardo Nogarola (81).

[51] Aristotle's ancient handbook on dialectic, the *Topica*, begins with the claim that "the purpose of this treatise is to discover a method by which we will be capable of producing arguments from reputable opinions" (1.1 100a18–20). These reputable opinions, called *endoxa* by Aristotle, are those "that seem to be so to all or to most, or to the wise, that is, to all of the wise, to most of the wise, or to the most knowledgeable and reputable of the wise" (1.1 100b22–3, 1.10 104a8–11, 1.14 105a35–105b1).

[52] Although Pico's threefold curriculum of moral philosophy, dialectic, and natural philosophy is commonly identified as having an antecedent in Stoic philosophy (e.g., see Copenhaver and Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, 167, and Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, 36), the threefold division of philosophical issues is present in Aristotle (*Topica* 1.14 105b19–29).

[53] The moral intellectualist view of the *Oratio* seems wholly absent from Pico's later epistolary counsels concerning the moral life given to his nephew. See the text of the May 1492 letter to Gianfrancesco Pico in appendix A of Thomas More, *English Poems, Life of Pico, The Last Things*, 340–9.

establish habits, and remove moral impurities.[54] After such a moral purification, one is ready for the second stage of the philosophical program, the treatment of dialectic, which will dissipate the "darkness of reason" (*rationis caliginem*) and "allay the agitation of reason anxiously confused between the disputes of words and the tricks of argumentation" (*sedabit dialectica rationis turbas inter orationum pugnantias et syllogismorum captiones anxie tumultuantis*).[55] Dialectic prepares one for the third and last subdiscipline of philosophy proper, natural philosophy, which appears to be equivalent to metaphysics or even natural philosophical theology, since it seeks out the marvels of nature (*miracula naturae*) and the power of God (*virtus Dei*).[56] Upon completion of this threefold philosophical program, one is sufficiently prepared for sacred theology. What concerns us here, however, is the role that Pico assigns to dialectic. Pico appears to regard dialectic as a discipline or method of adjudicating among views that appear to conflict on the basis of verbal disputes or defects in argumentation. In relation to the higher philosophical discipline of natural philosophy, dialectic appears to be merely preparatory.

In light of this description of the threefold curricular division of philosophical disciplines announced in the *Oratio*, it would seem that Pico's promulgation of his theses would be best categorized under the subdiscipline of dialectic. The precise techniques for the purifying or conciliating function of dialectic are in some respects fairly standard among practitioners of dialectic across the ages, and commentators have long recognized Pico's adherence to the traditional techniques, even while at times expressing dissatisfaction with his procedure. One writer contends, "In making propositions that seem incompatible on the surface turn out to be reconcilable, Pico is merely following an established procedure of medieval dialectic."[57] Pico's acquaintance with standard modes of interpreting authoritative texts, if only indicated in Pico's passing mention of figural and metaphorical interpretive techniques in the *Oratio*,[58] is surely exhibited in his later biblical commentary on the Psalms, where he employs traditional medieval modes of exegesis when interpreting

[54] See *Oratio*, 16, 18, 22, 24, 26, 28, 36, 38.

[55] *Oratio*, 16, 22.

[56] *Oratio*, 38.

[57] Kristeller, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and His Sources," 60. See also Philip Hughes, "Pico della Mirandola: 1463–1494: A Study of an Intellectual Pilgrimage," *Philosophia Reformata* 23–4 (1958–1959): 108–35, 164–81, 17–44, 65–73, at 111.

[58] See *Oratio*, 18: *per figuram*, and *Oratio*, 8: *significari*. For a discussion of Pico's indebtedness to a Hebrew version of the fourfold exegesis of scripture, see Wirszubski, *Encounter*, 262–3.

particular passages.[59] Indeed, in his defense of his thirteen controversial theses in the *Apologia*, Pico appears to rearticulate or rehabilitate them by means of interpretations that are in some instances far removed from a simply literal or obvious sense. Pico does stress in the *Oratio* that the mode of expression of some of the authors represented in his theses requires a significant degree of interpretive surmounting, and he gives the *dogmata* of Orpheus as an example:

> But, as was the custom of the ancient theologians, so Orpheus enveloped the mysteries of his dogmas with the coverings of fables and hid them within a poetic veil, so that someone reading his hymns would suppose there to be nothing underneath other than fables and purest trivialities. I preferred to reveal this so that one might know what labor was mine, what difficulty existed, in drawing out the concealed meanings of hidden philosophy from the deliberate knots of riddles and the recesses of fables. [*Sed qui erat veterum mos Theologorum ita Orpheus suorum dogmatum mysteria fabularum intexit involucris et poetico velamento dissimulavit, ut si quis legat illius hymnos, nihil subesse credat praeter fabellas nugasque meracissimas. Quod volui dixisse ut cognoscatur quis mihi labor, quae fuerit difficultas, ex affectatis aenigmatum syrpis, ex fabularum latebris latitantes eruere secretae philosophiae sensus.*][60]

Pico's belief that the Ancients used deliberate obfuscation by presenting their philosophical views under layers of poetic language and his claim to have recovered the meaning (*sensus*) of "hidden philosophy" in these texts assume that Pico is willing to use a variety of interpretive dialectical techniques in exhibiting and explaining reputable opinions of the Ancients.[61]

Perhaps Pico's most significant dialectical claim in the *Oratio* is his announced project of reconciling the apparently conflicting views of

[59] Antonio Raspanti contends that in the Psalms commentary "the innovation consists in the wealth and in the use of sources" (L'innovazione consiste nella ricchezza e nell' uso delle fonti) rather than in his use of interpretive schemes. "*L'essegi Pichiana delle* Expositiones in Psalmos," in Ioannis Pici Mirandulae, *Expositiones in Psalmos*, ed. Antonio Raspanti (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1997), 38–44, at 40. A similar assessment stressing Pico's adherence to traditional exegetical techniques in the Psalms commentary can be found in Crofton Black, *Pico's* Hetaplus *and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 84–94. Pico sets forth his understanding of the traditional fourfold method of scriptural interpretation in his *Apologia*; see *Opera omnia*, 178.

[60] *Oratio*, 78.

[61] Another hermeneutic of Pico's that is worthy of note is his appropriation of the Kabbalistic method of letter symbolism and letter substitution in Hebrew texts. For a discussion, see Wirszubski, *Encounter*, 129–30, 136–8, 165–7, 171–84, 189–90, 239–40, 258–61, and Klaus Reichert, "Pico della Mirandola and the Beginnings of Christian Kabbala," in *Mysticism, Magic and Kabbalah in Ashkenazi Judaism*, ed. Karl Erich Grözinger and Joseph Dan (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), 195–207.

three pairs of notable philosophers. Pico's comments regarding the first pair, Plato and Aristotle, are perhaps the best known, since they place him within a long tradition of commentators who contended that the greatest of Greek philosophers did not differ on the major points of their philosophies. As Pico notes, in his reconciliatory approach he is preceded by Boethius, Augustine, Simplicius, and John Philoponus.[62] Pico explains further in the *900 Theses* the exact methodology for his conciliation (*concordia*) of the Greek philosophers, contending that although in their words (*verba*) the philosophers may appear to be opposed, in meaning and substance (*sensus et res*) they are in accord.[63] This criterion of distinguishing the substance (*res*) of Platonic and Aristotelian texts from the apparent meaning of words (*verba*) was articulated also two years before the planned Roman debate, in a December 6, 1494, letter to Ermolao Barbaro.[64] Pico turned again to this issue of reconciling the two Greek philosophers in his late work, *De ente et uno*, in which he attempted to show the compatibility of the ultimate metaphysical commitments between Plato and Aristotle.[65] Presumably this hermeneutic that attends to meaning and substance beneath words supports Pico's contention in the *Oratio* and *900 Theses* that he will synthesize also the two other pairs of thinkers, Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, on the one hand, and Avicenna and Averroës, on the other. Pico is less ambitious, however, in claims of reconciliation for these two pairs of thinkers, for he is careful to specify in the *900 Theses* the particular subjects upon which reconciliation is possible.[66] Similarly, in the *Oratio*, he restricts his concordist plans for them to a number of *sententiae*.[67] With regard to Plato and Aristotle, however, Pico gives no such qualifications, perhaps in light of his assertion that there is no natural or divine question (*quaesitum naturale aut divinum*) upon which the Greek philosophers are not in agreement.[68] One commentator has underscored the fact that Pico's

[62] *Oratio*, 56–8.
[63] *900 Theses*, 364.
[64] *Opera omnia*, 369.
[65] In the dedicatory preface to his *De ente et uno*, Pico noted his plans to write a larger work to be titled *Concordia Platonis Aristotelisque*. See *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno, e Scritti vari*, 386. For a discussion of this reconciliation, see Michael J. B. Allen, "The Second Ficino-Pico Controversy: Parmenidean Poetry, Eristic, and the One," in *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone: Studi e documenti*, ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1986), 2:417–55.
[66] *900 Theses*, 366–71.
[67] *Oratio* 58.
[68] *900 Theses*, 364.

claims of reconciliation in the *Oratio* and the *900 Theses* are limited to these three pairs of philosophers and has suggested that the tendency of some commentators to discover a purported reconciliation of all philosophers and philosophies is textually unwarranted.[69] If this commentator is correct, the standard universalist theory of truth that is often attributed to Pico, which holds that all philosophers of past ages are expressing the same truth, is an overreading of Pico's more limited goals of reconciliation. Pico's more modest claims in regard to reconciling the thoughts of certain pairs of philosophers may be evidence that Pico had a stricter view of *prisca theologia* than that of the Florentine master, Marsilio Ficino.[70]

Even though Pico's dialectical method of reconciliation at the level of meaning or substance over that of words is explicitly restricted to three pairs of thinkers, a great number of Pico's *900 Theses* comprise opinions from authorities other than these three pairs. If Pico did not believe that all philosophers and theologians have arrived at the same truth, he must have had some methodological purpose in marshalling forth his diverse assembly of reputable opinions. It may be helpful to note that there is a form of Aristotelian dialectic that seems to match up well with Pico's procedure. Pico's treatment of reputable opinions appears to have much in common with the investigative dialectical method that informs much of Aristotle's scientific procedures. It is well known that at the beginning of many of his major works, including the *De anima* and *Metaphysica*, Aristotle sets forth the opinions of his predecessors and considers his own conclusions to a large degree to be consonant with their achievements.[71] Without arguing for an explicit methodological dependence that Pico may have had on Aristotelian methodological texts such as these, it suffices for our purposes here to indicate a dialectical similarity between the approaches to reputable opinions taken by Pico and Aristotle. Aristotle's view that truth possessed in infelicitously expressed reputable opinions must be unpacked or exhibited appears to anticipate Pico's contention that the truth of reputable opinions must be sought beyond the level of *verba* and instead found and set out at the level of *res*; both thinkers appear therefore to belong to the tradition of a particular form of dialectical methodology.

[69] See Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, 89–107, especially 97.

[70] For an overview of Ficino's views of "ancient theology," see Charles B. Schmitt, "Perennial Philosophy: From Agostino Steuco to Leibniz," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27 (1966): 505–32, at 507–11.

[71] See *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.1 1145b2–7; *Eudemian Ethics* 1.6 1216b28–35, 2.1 1220a15–17, 7.2 1235b13–15.

In some texts, Aristotle appeals to reputable opinions just after a particular position has been laid out so that they serve as independent confirmation – or "witnesses"[72] – of his established views.[73] Pico seems to share a similar view of the value of corroborating his positions with dialectical appeals to reputable opinions. For example, Pico claims to find verification of this threefold philosophical curriculum of moral philosophy, dialectic, and natural philosophy in the testimonies of Hebrew biblical texts, Greek mystery rites, Delphic precepts, pre-Socratic philosophers, and the sayings of Zoroaster.[74] In his appeals to these authorities, Pico does not seem to be concerned that he interprets these authorities in allegorical ways, perhaps justifying his procedure simply as the way to arrive at the *sensus et res* hidden behind the *verba* of reputable opinions.

This dialectical technique, which approaches authoritative opinions by subjecting them to interpretations that transcend the literal meaning of the words for the sake of finding a confirmation for an independent position, is one that a number of scholars have identified as the central approach employed by Pico in his excursion into nontraditional sources. In my view, it has been rightly argued that Pico's project in the *Oratio* and *900 Theses* is not to set forth a system comprising a uniform amalgamation of opinions from all traditions but to find in diverse sources a *confirmation* of some tenets of Christianity and his own philosophical positions. Such an interpretation qualifies the label of "syncretism" that often has been applied to Pico's methodology since the eighteenth century.[75] Pico's interest in a variety of texts from many traditions should not be viewed as evidence for a grand syncretic project of fusing together all traditions but rather testifies to Pico's apologetic interests and his willingness to find dialectical confirmations of theological and philosophical truths in a great diversity of nontraditional sources.[76] Pico is explicit in the *Oratio*

[72] *Eudemian Ethics* 1.6 1216b27–8.

[73] For typical instances, see *Metaphysica* 12.8 1074a36–b14; *De caelo* 1.3 270b6–10, 2.1 284a2–6.

[74] See *Oratio*, 16–38.

[75] Jakob Brucker's characterization of Pico's philosophy as a "pestilent syncretism" (*syncretismo pestilenti*) is discussed by Copenhaver, "Magic and the Dignity of Man," 295–7, and Leo Catana, "The Concept 'System of Philosophy': The Case of Jacob Brucker's Historiography of Philosophy," *History and Theory* 44 (2005): 72–90, at 86–7. See Brucker, *Historia critica philosophiae* (Leipzig: Breitkopf, 1743), 4:59. In contrast to Brucker's assessment, the notion of syncretism is praised as the key to Pico's work by Eugenio Anagnine in his *G. Pico della Mirandola: Sincretismo* religioso-filosofico 1463–1494 (Bari: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 1937), esp. 73–4.

[76] One of the most sustained arguments against approaching Pico as a syncretist is found in Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, 89–107.

about his motivation for exploring a wide variety of unexamined traditions, since in regard to his Hebrews studies of Kabbalah he claims to set out his theses "in confirmation of the most holy and Catholic faith" (*ad sacrosanctam et catholicam fidem confirmandam*).[77] One commentator has argued against a syncretic interpretation of Pico's project by observing that "Pico always used non-Christian sources in order to corroborate the doctrines of medieval Christianity. He never compromised the latter in order to support the former."[78] More recently, another commentator has argued against the celebrated view propounded by Frances Yates, that Pico was interested in magical and Kabbalistic texts in their own right. Instead, it is argued, Pico was governed by a strictly apologetic program in his approach to untraditional sources.[79] In light of these considerations, it seems more fitting to designate Pico's methodology as "dialectical" than as "syncretic." Certainly, the use of the former term better accounts for Pico's own description of how philosophy should be done, especially since he uses the former term and not the latter in his discussion of the methods of philosophy. Along these lines of interpretation, the novelty of Pico's dialectical treatment of *opiniones* lies primarily in the diversity of his sources rather than his manner of interpreting them, since he appears to stay within the traditional exegetical methods when treating *opiniones*. Given Pico's apologetic orientation, it appears that he does not believe the texts from Kabbalah to be the sources of new information or truths; rather, the highest purpose they can serve is external dialectical confirmation of truths already possessed within Christian doctrine, such

[77] *Oratio*, 68. See also the *900 Theses*, where Pico introduces Kabbalistic theses as "strongly confirming the Christian religion" (*Christianam religionem maxime confirmantes*) (516). Even among those commentators who agree on the apologetic motivation underlying Pico's forays into Hebrew sources, there is some disagreement on the tenor of Pico's views regarding the sources themselves. For opposing views, see David B. Ruderman, "The Italian Renaissance and Jewish Thought," in *Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Albert Rabil Jr. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 1:382–433, at 396 and 397, and Simonsohn, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola on Jews and Judaism," at 415 and 416.

[78] Avery Dulles, *Princeps Concordiae: Pico della Mirandola and the Scholastic Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941), 24.

[79] See Moshe Idel, "Kabbalah and Hermeticism in Dame Frances A. Yates's Renaissance," in *Ésotérisme, gnoses et imaginaire symbolique*, ed. Richard Caron et al. (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 71–90, esp. 74–6. For more on Pico's apologetic orientation, see John F. D'Amico, "Humanism and Pre-Reformation Theology," in *Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Albert Rabil Jr. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 3:349–79, at 361, and Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1964), 61–2.

as the triune character of God,[80] the reality of the Incarnation,[81] and the divinity of Christ as the fulfillment of messianic prophecies.[82]

I have tried to place Pico's plan to present the *Oratio* and defend the *900 Theses* within a traditional setting by arguing that Pico's Roman proposal falls in line with three customary academic conventions: the medieval tradition of the *quaestiones disputatae*, the tradition of producing of *sententiae* or *florilegia* collections, and the practice of conventional dialectic in the most general of Aristotelian senses. In this threefold approach to the *Oratio* and the *900 Theses*, I have set forth a picture of Pico that presents him not as an unparalleled public promulgator of a final philosophical and theological system premised on intercultural syncretism but a traditional scholar who participates in the well-established medieval intellectual exercises of public disputation, sentence collecting, and dialectics. Although this traditionalist reading of Pico's Roman project admittedly does not have the excitement and appeal of some modern interpretations noted above, it does place Pico in a traditional context that may allow for a more measured approach to his thought.

IV. Natura Humana

Having located Pico's Roman plans within the context of three traditional academic exercises, it is now fitting to turn more explicitly to the content of the *Oratio*. Even though in its first printing Gianfrancesco Pico published the work as a continuous whole (and most editions preserve this custom), it seems natural to divide the *Oratio* into major sections or divisions according to the principal subjects that it broaches. In my judgment, the work can be neatly divided into the five sections:[83]

1. The Discussion of Human Nature (2–16)
2. Three Elements of a Philosophical Curriculum (16–38)
3. An Apologia for Philosophy (38–42)

[80] See *900 Theses*, 523, 535.

[81] See *900 Theses*, 527, 533, 535.

[82] See *900 Theses*, 523, 537, 539. For a discussion of the confirmatory character of Pico's use of Kabbalah, see Wirszubski, *Encounter*, 161–9.

[83] Admittedly, other divisions are possible, though in my judgment the fivefold division best represents the main subjects of the *Oratio*. While Paul Oskar Kristeller has argued for a twofold division of the *Oratio* in *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. Virginia Conant (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), at 407, a tripartite division is defended by Louis Valcke and Roland Galibois in *Le périple intellectual de Jean Pic de la Mirandole suivi du* Discors de la dignité de l'homme *et du traité* L'être et l'un (Sainte-Foy, Quebec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1994), 75.

4. Three Objections to the Roman Disputation (42–52)
5. The Subjects of the Theses (52–81)

In the first section, Pico sets forth his celebrated views concerning human nature, and this part of the work has traditionally received the most attention by commentators. In the second, Pico articulates and defends the merits of the threefold philosophical curriculum noted above. The third section comprises a brief autobiographical statement in which Pico praises and defends the study of philosophy and laments that some have tried to subordinate the discipline to practical endeavors; this part of the *Oratio* can be seen as an apology or protreptic for philosophy. In the fourth section, Pico sets forth three objections that some might bring to the proposed disputation of his *900 Theses*, and he provides a rebuttal to each objection. To those who object to disputation in principle, Pico responds by defending its necessity to the practice of philosophy. To those who object to Pico's youthfulness in the treating of lofty subjects, Pico remarks that the outcome of the disputation will either confirm or allay their suspicions. To those who object to the high number of theses, Pico points out, as was mentioned above, that he falls short of those who wish to dispute on any topic whatsoever.[84] The fifth and final section of the *Oratio* addresses some divisions within the *900 Theses*, and here Pico defends his inclusion of subjects that traditionally have fallen outside the subject matter of public disputations, such as natural magic and Hebrew Kabbalistic texts. Since among commentators the discussion of human nature has received the most attention – to the extent that the other four sections are oftentimes largely ignored or minimized – my approach here will attempt to account for the unity of the *Oratio*.

Pico's celebrated *Oratio* begins with a consideration of Abdul the Saracen's assertion that human beings are most worthy of wonder in the world. Pico finds a dialectical confirmation of Abdul's contention (*sententia*) in ancient statements and testimonies from a wide variety of sources, including a line from Hermes Trismegistus describing man as a great miracle (*magnum miraculum*), some Hebrew and Persian authorities, and a number of traditional philosophical commonplaces that defend a privileged status for human beings in the world.[85] Although Pico agrees with the

[84] To these three objections, Pico identifies two more in the *Apologia*. There are some, Pico contends, who opposed his disputation due to a general dislike of philosophy and learning and others who accused him personally by calling him a sect leader of the church, a magician, and an impious person (*Opera omnia*, 115).

[85] *Oratio*, 2.

view that human beings are most deserving of wonder, he contends that the principle reasons (*rationes principales*) for this claim have not been set forth but that, at long last, he has arrived at an understanding both of the true condition (*conditio*) of human beings in the hierarchy of the universe (*in universi serie*) and of the reason why human beings are the most fortunate and most worthy recipients of admiration.[86] Pico then discloses his own views on these issues and in doing so sets forth what is arguably the best-known account of the human condition in all of Renaissance philosophy. In short, Pico presents an alternative creation story to the depiction found in Genesis, contending that, unlike all other creatures, human beings were created according to no pattern (*archetypus*).[87] Lacking all form (*facies*), a human being is a work of indeterminate nature (*indiscretae opus imaginis*) who must fashion himself according to an essence (*forma*) of his choosing.[88] No proper feature (*proprium*) or distinguishing function (*munus*) belongs to human beings as such, since they lack any fixed place (*certa sedes*) in the order of creation.[89] While the nature (*natura*) of all other beings is limited, humans suffer no such restrictions. In his creation account, Pico has God explain to the first human being his condition:

> The limited nature of other beings is restricted by laws preordained by us. You, restricted by no such limits, may define it for yourself, according to your free will, to whose authority I have assigned you. [*Definita ceteris natura intra praescriptas a nobis leges coercetur. Tu, nullis angustiis coercitus, pro tuo arbitrio, in cuius manu te posui, tibi illam praefinies.*][90]

Further, God explains to the first human that

> as the free and voluntary molder and maker of yourself, you may establish yourself in the form you securely select (*ut tui ipsius quasi arbitrarius honorariusque plastes et fictor, in quam malueris tute formam effingas*).[91]

[86] *Oratio*, 3, 4.
[87] *Oratio*, 4.
[88] In his discussion of the term *indiscretus* in the expression *indiscretae opus imaginis*, Francesco Bausi notes "the adjective is of Latin Christian origin, in the sense of *undetermined* or *indistinct*, where it often is predicated of God, comparable to the Greek *adiakritos*" (nel senso di 'incerto, indistinto', l'aggettivo è del latino cristiano, dove è spesso riferito a Dio [gr. *adiakritos*]), (*Nec rhetor neque philosophus*, 135. Pico's use of traditional divine attributes to describe the human condition may be a preparation for his forthcoming argument concerning human deification.
[89] *Oratio*, 6.
[90] *Oratio*, 6.
[91] *Oratio*, 6.

In asserting in these texts that human beings are free to assume a determining principle of their choosing, Pico uses traditional scholastic philosophical terms (e.g., *forma, natura*) to contend that human beings lack the basic intrinsic limiting principle usually understood to be present in all creatures.[92] According to scholastic metaphysics, the substantial form (or nature or essence) is an intrinsic principle of a thing that establishes its powers, making it be *what* it is and not some other kind of being.[93] Indeed, on some medieval views, the substantial form of a thing is a restricting principle or principle of limitation that keeps the thing from being the unlimited and unrestricted pure existence who is God. Within the traditional metaphysical framework, a thing's substantial form establishes it in a place in the hierarchy of being that begins with God as creator and extends down through orders of creation. In Pico's account, however, the absence of a metaphysical principle of determination is the cause for human superiority in the order of creation.[94] Not surprisingly, then, a common summary of these early passages of the *Oratio* has consisted of the view that Pico simply removes human beings from the medieval hierarchy of being or places human beings outside the Great Chain of Being.[95]

It is because human beings lack a determining principle that Pico both considers them worthy of wonder and affirms his commitment to the view that a human being is a great miracle.[96] As I see it, Pico views a human

[92] Pico's familiarity with scholastic philosophical terms is evident from his terminology as well as from his own account of his education. See his June 9, 1485, letter to Ermolao Barbaro (*Opera omnia*, 352).

[93] For a traditional presentation of these scholastic terms, see Bernard Wuellner, *Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy* (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing Co., 1956), 42, 47, 79, 104.

[94] One commentator explains, "L'absence de détermination n'est pas une carence ontologique; c'est, au contraire, le comble de la grandeur: le fait que l'homme ne cesse de s'inventer par rapport à l'ordre de la pure nature est le signe de la liberté et la marque de sa transcendance par rapport à cet ordre." Fernand Roulier, *Jean Pic de la Mirandole (1463–1494)* (Geneva: Editions Slatkine, 1989), 440.

[95] See, e.g., Edward P. Mahoney, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Origen on Humans, Choice, and Hierarchy," *Vivens Homo* 5 (1994): 359–76, at 360–1; Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers*, 67; and Jill Kraye, "Moral Philosophy," in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, 303–86, at 313. For general background on the metaphysical notion of hierarchy, see Edward P. Mahoney, "Metaphysical Foundations of the Hierarchy of Being According to Some Late Medieval and Renaissance Philosophers," in *Philosophies of Existence: Ancient and Medieval*, ed. Parviz Morewedge (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 165–257.

[96] Pico confirms Abdul the Saracen's *sententia* with Hermes Trismegistus's famous line early in the *Oratio* (2) and then reaffirms the fittingness of this designation after tying it to the view that humans have no determining principle (4).

being as a "great miracle" precisely because miracles are traditionally understood to be events that operate outside the limitation of a nature, or, collectively, outside the order of nature. As a miraculous event appears to be a transgression of a nature or the laws of nature, so does a human being appear to escape the limitations or boundaries present to all other created beings.

Having contended that human beings have no intrinsic determining principle, Pico declares that human beings are free to choose from existing natures present in creation. Pico presents what could be styled a moral ontology, since he asserts that the human acquisition of a nature will follow from the actions a human being performs. Pico sets forth a fivefold range of options open to human beings, arguing that humans can seek to live vegetative, sensitive, rational, angelic, or divine lives, corresponding to the existing natures of plants, earthly beasts, heavenly animals, angels, and God.[97] All options are not presented as equal, since Pico clearly condemns a life of beastly concerns as an unfitting condition for human beings.[98] Having set forth this view about human metaphysical indeterminacy or multipotentiality, Pico marshals forth extrinsic confirmations of his view from a great diversity of texts and traditions; in light of the discussion above, I consider these confirmatory appeals to be dialectical. Pico does not present his views concerning the human condition as some kind of distillation or broad induction derived from accounts he has read but rather he appeals to authorities as extrinsic corroboration of the views he has already discovered and set forth. In support of his views about the human condition, Pico appeals explicitly to the testimonies he finds in Islamic, Hebrew, and Christian religious writings, passages from classical Latin and Greek poetry, pre-Socratic philosophical texts, Hermetic writings, and points of Chaldean theology.[99] The diverse range of sources he presents in the *Oratio* as a dialectical confirmation of his views on the human condition no doubt was intended as a foretaste of his upcoming defense of the 900 wide-ranging theses drawn from equally varied sources.

Not surprisingly, Pico's views on the human condition have drawn numerous interpretations, many of which have been criticized in historiographical studies.[100] Nevertheless, some general approaches to the

[97] See *Oratio*, 8.
[98] For a discussion, see Roulier, *Jean Pic*, 445–6.
[99] *Oratio*, 8–12.
[100] See n. 5 above.

Oratio are worthy of note. To begin with, a few commentators minimize the importance of the *Oratio* by simply denying that any of Pico's claims in the work should be seen as contributing to a philosophical anthropology or theoretical analysis of the human condition. On this view, the *Oratio*, because of its "oratorical character," should be considered "one of the least important in content," and Pico's philosophical views should be sought elsewhere.[101] This approach to the *Oratio* can be defended further by contending that Pico's choice of the literary genre of oratory leads him to speak loosely and deploy fables and metaphors. On this interpretation, "Pico precluded philosophical investigation" with his choice of genre, and his statements about the human condition "cannot be represented as a serious philosophical statement about man."[102]

Several responses to this minority view are possible. One could begin by pointing out that Pico does not appear to restrict the practice of philosophy to a particular literary genre, since in one of his letters he bestows much praise upon the poems of Lorenzo de' Medici specifically for their presentation of philosophical content.[103] If Pico believed that poetry could serve as a vehicle for expressing philosophical arguments and positions, there seems to be no a priori reason to exclude the genre of oratory as a vehicle for philosophical argumentation.[104] Another response might be to point out that the *Oratio* fails to observe the rhetorical conventions of Latinity proper to classical oratory, so if judged according to the classical and humanistic canons of the day, it must be judged severely.[105] A more common response, however, to the objection that the *Oratio* should not be treated as a source for Pico's theoretical views is to find corroboration in other works for Pico's views in the *Oratio*.[106] Most obviously, many sections of the *Oratio* were incorporated verbatim into Pico's *Apologia*, which was his unsuccessful attempt to stave off the charges of heresy stemming

[101] Dulles, *Princeps Concordiae*, 15.

[102] Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, 35. See also 45.

[103] See *Opera omnia*, 348–51.

[104] For a discussion on the compatibility of stylistic elegance and philosophical methods of writing in the *Oratio*, see Bausi, *Nec rhetor neque philosophus*, 155–63.

[105] One commentator notes that the *Oratio* "is written in a style that is anything but Ciceronian, with it scholastic terminology, diminutives, compounds, and Grecisms." Martin L. McLaughlin, *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance: The Theory and Practice of Literary Imitation in Italy from Dante to Bembo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 233. In his philological study of Pico's Latinity, Bausi identifies thirteen neologisms in the text of the *Oratio* (*Nec rhetor neque philosophus*, 138–40).

[106] See Roulier, *Jean Pic*, 434: "Aucun livre posterior à l'Oratio n'expose de manière aussi systématique la doctrine de l'autocréation de l'homme; mais on y trouve des allusions à cette doctrine."

from Innocent VIII's papal commission. The *Apologia*, with its painstaking defense of the thirteen condemned theses, cannot be classified as an oratorical work, even though at times Pico does employ oratorical techniques in its composition. Another distinct approach to defending the *Oratio* against attempts to marginalize it is to identify key themes that are proper to both the *Oratio* and later works. Some commentators have argued that the central notions of the first part of the *Oratio*, such as human indeterminacy and freedom, are repeated elsewhere in Pico's corpus, most notably in his religious commentaries on Genesis,[107] the Psalms,[108] and Job[109] and in his first work, the *Commento*.[110] Other commentators have argued there is a unity of thought between Pico's early and final works by contending that Pico's early defense of human indeterminacy and freedom in the *Oratio* requires, as a theoretical complement, the dismantling of the notion of astrological determinacy that was the goal of Pico's posthumously published massive diatribe against astrology, the *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*.[111] The most straightforward approach, however, to discrediting the claim that Pico's *Oratio* is devoid of a theoretical account of human beings has been simply to analyze the evidence and arguments Pico offers for the positions he defends in the work, a practice followed by most contemporary commentators on the *Oratio*.

A great diversity of approaches can be discovered among those who find in the *Oratio* a substantive theoretical account of the human condition. While conceding that the *Oratio* "is not a treatise on anthropology," one commentator notes that "Pico situates himself deliberately and clearly in the perspective of a metaphysician."[112] Such a view seems largely

[107] See Charles H. Lohr, "Metaphysics," in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, 537–638, at 579; Kristeller, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and His Sources," 67; and Kristeller, "*The Dignity of Man*," 176–7.

[108] See Raspanti, "*L'essegi Pichiana*," 41–2, and Roulier, *Jean Pic*, 434.

[109] See Chaim Wirszubski, "Giovanni Pico's Book of Job," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 32 (1969): 171–99, at 196.

[110] See Roulier, *Jean Pic*, 431–2.

[111] See Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. Mario Domandi (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), 115; Antonino Poppi, "Fate, Fortune, Providence and Human Freedom," in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, 641–67, at 651–2; and Martin A. Bertman, "Pico's Intellectual Politics," *History of European Ideas* 7 (1986): 227–36, at 228. For general assessments of Pico's *Disputationes*, see Steven vanden Broecke, *The Limits of Influence: Pico, Louvain, and the Crisis of Renaissance Astrology* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 55–80, and Brian Vickers, "Critical Reactions to the Occult Sciences during the Renaissance," in *The Scientific Enterprise*, ed. Edna Ullmann-Margalit (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1992), 4:43–92.

[112] Roulier, *Jean Pic*: "n'est un traité d'anthropologie" (436); "délibérément et clairement il se place dans la perspective d'un metaphysician" (438).

shared by the commentators who find Pico's approach to be indebted to Greek or Latin philosophical authorities; interpretations can be found, for instance, that locate Pico's defense of the initial naturelessness of human beings in standard Platonic and Neoplatonic works that focus on the soul's return to a first principle.[113] Other commentators work to establish that Pico's position is in line with basic texts from the Aristotelian,[114] Boethian,[115] or Thomistic[116] traditions. On these interpretations, direct influence was exerted on Pico by major figures in the history of philosophy, and claims of such influence are sometimes corroborated by consulting extant catalogues of Pico's impressive personal library.[117] Some commentators find Pico's views on the human condition to be influenced by his philosophical contemporaries, such as the Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino.[118] Other assertions of influence are less direct; one commentator has argued that Pico's account of human indeterminacy should be associated with the thought of the fourteenth-century scholastics Jean de Ripa and Paul of Venice, insofar as they considered a metaphysical doctrine of *latitudo formarum* that "introduced the notion of variability into substantial forms."[119] With a different approach, another commentator has carefully argued that Pico's philosophical anthropology is largely indebted to the doctrines of the late eleventh-century and early twelfth-century Spanish Arabic philosopher Ibn al-Sid al-Batalyawsi, who contended in his treatise *The Imaginary Circles* that human beings are not restricted to a single substantial form.[120] On this interpretation, Pico may

[113] See Michael J. B. Allen, "Cultura Hominis: Giovanni Pico, Marsilio Ficino, and the Idea of Man," in *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Convegno internazionale di studi nel cinquecentesimo anniversario della morte (1494–1994)*, ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1997), 173–96, at 187.

[114] M. V. Dougherty, "Two Possible Sources for Pico's *Oratio*," *Vivarium* 40 (2002): 219–41, at 235–40.

[115] Dougherty, "Two Possible Sources," 232–5.

[116] Zsolt Almási, "Fable or Philosophical Claim? Thomas of Aquinas in Pico's *Oratio*," *Verbum: Analecta neolatina* 6 (2004): 189–98.

[117] For a discussion of the contents of Pico's library and his reading habits, see Kibre, *The Library of Pico*, and Anthony Grafton, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Trials and Triumphs of an Omnivore," in *Commerce with the Classics: Ancient Books and Renaissance Readers* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 93–134. The fate of Pico's library is chronicled in M. J. C. Lowry, "Two Great Venetian Libraries in the Age of Aldus Manutius," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 57 (1974): 128–66.

[118] See Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, 407–10.

[119] Lohr, "Metaphysics," 571, 591–4, cited text on 593.

[120] See Moshe Idel, "The Anthropology of Yohanan Alemanno: Sources and Influences," *Topoi* 7 (1988): 201–10, and Moshe Idel, "The Ladder of Ascension: The Reverberations of a Medieval Motif in the Renaissance," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 2:83–93.

not have had direct access to the philosophical corpus of al-Batalyawsi, but the philosopher's doctrines could have been passed along to Pico through the mediation of his friend and teacher, the Hebrew scholar Yohanan Alemanno.[121]

More numerous than the commentators who find Pico's views on the human condition in the *Oratio* to be indebted to philosophical works are those commentators who see his views prefigured in religious or theological traditions. An influential study has argued that the notion of a human being as the *imago dei*, found in the text of Genesis 1:26, is central to Pico's reflections on the human condition.[122] An alternative theological approach defended by a great many commentators finds anticipations of Pico's views in patristic texts, and the standard authorities cited in this regard include Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Nemesius of Emesa, and Marcarius of Egypt.[123] Particular attention has been paid to the doctrines of Origen as an influential source for Pico's views on the human condition, especially Origen's contention the human soul is a fallen angel.[124] A common variation among the commentators who find a patristic ancestry for Pico's views is to style his defense of choice and free will in the acquisition of a nature as an essentially neo-Pelagian commitment.[125]

In addition to the standard readings of Pico's *Oratio* in light of antecedent philosophical or theological sources, it must be noted that an

[121] For a study of the relationship between Pico and Alemanno, see B. C. Novak, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Jochanan Alemanno," *Journal of the Warburg and Coutauld Institutes* 45 (1982): 125–47. Novak defends the traditional view that Pico and Alemanno first met in Florence 1588. Idel's thesis requires an earlier meeting, since the *Oratio* was written in 1486. Idel defends an earlier meeting in "The Ladder of Ascension," 86–7.

[122] See Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 2:507, 524.

[123] Henri de Lubac, who provides one of the most detailed studies of Pico's debt to Patristic texts, contends, "La 'métamorphose' célébrée par Jean Pic hérite, elle aussi, d'une très longue tradition, et la connaissance de cette tradition est indispensable pour comprendre la portée des brilliants paradoxes qui font l'un des charmes de l'Oratio" (*Pic de la Mirandole*, 184).

[124] See Edward P. Mahoney, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Origen," 359–76, and Edgar Wind, "The Revival of Origen," in *Studies in Art and Literature for Belle da Costa Greene*, ed. Dorothy Miner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), 412–24. Some commentators have suggested that Pico's defense of Origen in the *Apologia* is a subtle and indirect autobiographical defense, since parallels can be drawn between Origen's difficulties with church authorities and those of Pico. For a discussion, see Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, 49.

[125] See, e.g., Ernst Cassirer, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: A Study in the History of Renaissance Ideas," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 3 (1942): 123–44, 319–46, at 329, and Philip Hughes, "A Study of an Intellectual Pilgrimage," 133. For a discussion of Pelagian interpretations of Pico, see Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, 77–81.

increasingly popular approach has been to see the *Oratio*'s views on the human condition to be grounded in Hermetic and Kabbalistic texts. On this interpretation, Pico champions the human being as a powerful magus who, released upon the world, can act upon it with an array of mysterious magical and occult powers. One commentator has argued that "the complete Renaissance Magus, as he burst upon the world for the first time in Pico's oration in his full power and Dignity, was a practitioner of both natural magic and also of its 'supreme form,' practical Cabala," and the "oration was to echo and re-echo throughout the Renaissance, and it is, indeed, the great charter of Renaissance magic."[126] This occultist account of the *Oratio*, however, has perhaps been the most controversial approach to Pico's thought and has been the target of historical criticism.[127]

Alongside these varied interpretations of the *Oratio*, which look back to find antecedents, sources, and influences for Pico's views on the human condition, are some approaches that find in them seminal anticipations of future historical movements and ideas. For instance, the fact that some of Pico's interests in the *Oratio* are theological, along with the fact that Pico initially experienced difficulties at the hands of Roman church authorities, has led a few commentators to portray Pico as an harbinger of the Protestant Reformation and even to claim that Pico's articulation of his theses was nothing less than an unsuccessful version of Martin Luther's famous episode at Wittenberg.[128] Other, arguably less careful, placements of Pico in the history of ideas present him as an early Nietzschean philosopher of will or a Sartrean existentialist.[129]

In light of the varied and often conflicting interpretations of Pico's views, a few general observations can be drawn. I contend that the

[126] Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 103, 86. See also 102, 110–11, and Frances A. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 21.

[127] A recent evaluation can be found in Idel, "Kabbalah and Hermeticism," 71–90. See also Trinkaus, *In Our Image*, 519–20. General criticisms of Yates's larger approach to Renaissance intellectual history include Brian Vickers, "Frances Yates and the Writing of History," *Journal of Modern History* 51 (1979): 287–316; Vickers, "Critical Reactions," 43–92; and Trinkaus, *In Our Image*, 498–505.

[128] See Philip Hughes, "A Study of an Intellectual Pilgrimage," 66–7, 69, 73, 126, 168, 170–1. For other accounts that depict Pico as a proto-reformer, see Engelbert Monnerjahn, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Ein Beitrag zur philosophischen Theologie des italienischen Humanismus* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1960), 194–6; Kristeller, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and His Sources," 80; Cassirer, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," 139; and Greswell, *Memoirs*, 236.

[129] For references to modern discussants of these interpretations, see Roulier, *Jean Pic*, 435, 443, and Dougherty, "Two Possible Sources," 221–2.

proliferation of the many differing interpretations of Pico's thought on the human condition stems to a large degree from a failure to recognize the essentially dialectical character of Pico's procedure in the *Oratio* and the *900 Theses*. In his exegetical approach to authoritative opinions, Pico does not hesitate to treat them in ways that produce, at times, figurative and metaphorical confirmations of his views. Simply put, the fact that Pico finds a dialectical confirmation of one of his views in a text from an authority does not, in itself, commit Pico to the general philosophical or theological outlook of that authority; Pico seeks corroboration of his views, and this dialectical process of confirmation need not commit him to an apology for the texts he cites. To give an example, consider the approach that some commentators have taken in evaluating Pico's relationship to the Hermetic texts attributed to Hermes Trismegistus. While it must be admitted that in one place in the *Oratio* Pico cites a text from Hermes Trismegistus, this citation does not suffice to establish the *Oratio* as essentially a Hermetic document. When Pico cites the line "A great miracle, O Asclepius, is the human being" (*magnum, o Asclepi, miraculum est homo*), he does so as a confirmation of the *sententia* of Abdul the Saracen on the distinguished condition of human beings, and the appeal to Abdul the Saracen is given to support Pico's own forthcoming views on the human condition.[130] As a dialectician in the general Aristotelian sense, Pico feels free to modify or stress opinions according to the particular needs of his argument. Pico's freedom to do so is perhaps premised on his distinction between *res* and *verba*, a distinction that allows him to adapt (or even manipulate) opinions to confirm his views, even when doing so requires that he ascribe metaphorical or allegorical readings to the authoritative citations he gathers to support his project. In using these methods, Pico exhibits the standard interpretive techniques proper to the dialectical tradition.

V. Deificatio

I have discussed above the first two parts of the *Oratio*, focusing on Pico's defense of the unique condition of human beings in the order of creation and his threefold philosophical curriculum that serves as a propaedeutic to sacred theology. As mentioned above, the bulk of the scholarly interest in the *Oratio* has generally focused on the first part, and in anthologizing Pico's work it has not been uncommon for editors to present the first part

[130] *Oratio*, 2.

alone and omit the others altogether. In light of the disproportionate lack of attention that the later parts traditionally have received, a hermeneutic approach to the text that can account for the unity of the *Oratio* seems in order. A reading that exhibits the unity between the sections can be beneficial, especially if it limits the conflicting interpretations that surround Pico's *Oratio*, and a commitment to showing the congruence of Pico's philosophical anthropology and his philosophical curriculum will likely improve our understanding of the motivations for his Roman project.

There is one theme present in both the first and second parts of the *Oratio* that I would like to propose as a key for demonstrating the unity of Pico's philosophical anthropology and his threefold philosophical curriculum. The theme is that of ultimate human unity with God, which Pico identifies with a strong version of deification.[131] Both parts of the *Oratio* identify the state of deification as the goal of human endeavors; in the first part, Pico sets forth a metaphysical account of how deification is possible, while in the second part, he presents a curriculum for bringing about that deification. We have noted above that Pico's defense of a fivefold range of options open to human beings terminates with the highest option, which is unity with God. Pico, as shown in this passage, clearly privileges this option among the other four:

> If not satisfied with the lot of creatures, one will recover oneself into the center of one's own unity; one will surpass all things, having become one spirit with God and placed in the solitary darkness of the Father who is above all things (*et si nulla creaturarum sorte contentus in unitatis centrum suae se receperit, unus cum Deo spiritus factus, in solitaria Patris caligine qui est super omnia constitutus omnibus antestabit*).[132]

Here Pico invokes a notion of deification that appears especially consonant with discussions found in Pseudo-Dionysius as well as the general Neoplatonic mystical tradition.[133] The goal of a metaphysical unity with God, although defended in classical thought in both the Aristotelian and Platonic trajectories of philosophy, is certainly dominant in Christian religious and theological texts, and admittedly in other works Pico is more

[131] A recent study by Brian P. Copenhaver underscores the importance of deification in the *Oratio*; see his "The Secret of Pico's *Oration*: Cabala and Renaissance Philosophy," in *Renaissance and Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Peter A. French et al., Midwest Studies in Philosophy, vol. 26 (Boston: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 56–81.

[132] *Oratio*, 8.

[133] For a discussion of the historical antecedents of the expression *in solitaria Patris caligine*, see Bausi, *Nec rhetor neque philosophus*, 120–1.

explicit in his specifically Christian understanding of deification.[134] In the *Oratio*, however, this goal of becoming "one spirit with God" is premised on Pico's prior claim that human beings are devoid of an intrinsic limiting metaphysical principle or form (*forma*, *natura*, *facies*, *imago*). By including divinity in the range of actualizations open to multipotential human beings, Pico appears to escape a particularly thorny metaphysical problem vexing to some medieval thinkers, namely, how the intrinsic limitations of nature are to be overcome in the divinization or deification of human beings in becoming one with God. Working within a traditional metaphysics of nature and grace, some medieval thinkers struggled to avoid these two conclusions: (1) that human nature is destroyed with deification and (2) that the gratuitous character of God's act of deifying human beings is compromised by positing within the limitations of human nature some intrinsic ordination or inclination toward deification. In other words, to suggest that human nature is destroyed with deification would appear to render the purely natural order superfluous, while suggesting that deification is natural to human beings would appear to compromise the gratuitous character of God's bestowal of deification.[135] Pico's denial, therefore, that a nature or metaphysical principle of limitation resides within human beings and his emphasis on human multipotentiality jointly appear to present a solution to this medieval problem. In short, a nature that does not exist need not be overcome. Indeed, as mentioned above, a nature or essence is traditionally understood in medieval metaphysics to be a principle of limitation that restricts the creature to a definite mode of existence, in contrast to the unrestricted pure being who is God. By denying that such a limiting or restricting principle is present in a human being, Pico articulates a view that posits a metaphysical continuity between human beings and God. How Pico protects the gratuity or free character of deification on the part of God, however, becomes apparent only in his discussion of the threefold philosophical curriculum that prepares one for deification.

In the second part of the *Oratio*, Pico concedes that the discipline of philosophy does not and cannot satisfy human beings. The point has often been overlooked by commentators who contend that Pico's Roman

[134] For instance, in his commentary on Genesis, Pico uses the traditional orders of nature and grace in his account of the soul's union with God. See *Heptaplus*, expositio VII, prooemium, 324–6. For ancient discussions, see Plato *Theaetetus* 176B and Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.1 1145a20–30, 8.7 1159a8–9.

[135] For the medieval background to this problem, see William R. O'Connor, *The Natural Desire for God* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1948).

project was to establish an ultimate *pax philosophica*.[136] According to Pico, philosophy cannot offer "true rest and lasting peace" (*vera quies et solida pax*) since "that is the function and privilege of most sacred theology" (*idest sanctissimae theologiae, munus et privilegium*).[137] Indirectly referencing the medieval personification of theology as queen of the sciences, Pico refers to the discipline of theology as a most blessed mother (*mater beatissima*) who provides the most holy peace (*pax santissima*) that makes the soul the dwelling of God.[138] In this account, Pico appears to acknowledge a formal distinction between the disciplines of philosophy and sacred theology, since the former discipline is held to be a necessary prerequisite for the latter, and the former cannot bring about peace. Theology supervenes upon the soul after philosophical preparation, bringing with it the deification of the soul. Pico explains that with the advent of theology, "we shall be no longer ourselves, but the very One who made us" (*iam non ipsi nos, sed ille erimus ipse qui fecit nos*).[139]

Similarly, in another text, Pico contends that "if we first do what is in us to do" (*si quid est in nobis ipsi prius egerimus*), which he explains is the threefold curriculum of moral philosophy, dialectic, and natural philosophy, then "we shall be moved, Fathers, we shall be moved by Socratic ecstasies, which will so place us outside of our mind that they place our mind and our very selves in God" (*Agemur, Patres, agemur Socraticis furoribus, qui extra mentem ita nos ponant, ut mentem nostram et nos ponant in Deo*).[140]

In these texts, Pico argues that the advent of theology, which comes upon the soul after its completion of the threefold philosophical curriculum, is to be identified with deification. The soul that is taken up into theology becomes one with God upon finishing the hierarchy of the three philosophical disciplines. This strict identification of the discipline of theology with the deification of the soul appears to reaffirm the intellectualist position discussed above that surfaced in Pico's account of moral philosophy; as the study of moral philosophy appears to suffice for success in the moral life, so here the theoretical discipline of

[136] See Kristeller, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and His Sources," 75; Copenhaver and Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, 176; and Eugenio Garin, *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance*, trans. Peter Munz (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 106–8. A seminal account for these studies is Eugenio Garin, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Vita et dottrina* (Florence: Felice le Monnier, 1937), 73–89.

[137] *Oratio*, 22.

[138] *Oratio*, 24.

[139] *Oratio*, 30.

[140] *Oratio*, 28.

theology is identified with the spiritual life and deification. It is noteworthy that Pico describes theology as descending on the soul upon the completion of the threefold philosophical curriculum; indeed, a number of texts underscore the passivity or receptivity of the soul.[141] If Pico's account can be read in a way that protects the divine gratuity of the deification of the human being, it would seem that Pico's emphasis on the passivity of the soul in the advent of theology in the second part of the *Oratio* is essential to this interpretation. Admittedly, Pico appears more circumspect in the second part of the *Oratio* than in the first, since in the earlier part some of Pico's texts seem quite confident of deification.[142] The account in the second part of the *Oratio* that describes the action of theology on the passive soul should temper interpretations that privilege texts from the first part alone. Thus, both Pico's metaphysical account of the human condition in the first part of the *Oratio* and the philosophical curriculum that leads to theology set forth in the second part converge on the theme of deification and both contribute to a solution to a traditional medieval concern.

VI. Oratio

Having set forth a reading of the *Oratio* that attempts to account for the unity of the work, I now offer a few remarks concerning the work's reception and place in the history of philosophy. While present-day interest in the *Oratio* is not in doubt, there has been some controversy regarding the early reception of the work. Some commentators have argued recently that Renaissance intellectuals considered the *Oratio* to be the least significant work of Pico's corpus, alleging that it was largely ignored by early readers, only to be resurrected in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by anachronistic historians looking to project contemporary concerns into an artificial reconstruction of the ideals of the Renaissance.[143]

[141] Pico employs passive verbs throughout his account of the agency of theology; see *Oratio* 28: "we shall be moved" (*agemur*) and *Oratio* 30: "we shall be raised" (*sublimati*). The use of passive verbs is noted by Roulier: "l'Oratio, de son côté, insiste sur l'initiative divine dans le processus qui conduit l'homme à la beatitude" (*Jean Pic*, 559).

[142] See *Oratio*, 12: "Let a certain holy ambition invade the soul, so that not contented with mediocre things, we seek the greatest things, and strive with all our powers to attain them, since if we will it, we can achieve them" (*Invadet animum sacra quaedam ambitio ut mediocribus non contenti anhelemus ad summa, adque illa [quando possumus si volumus] consequenda totis viribus enitamur*).

[143] See Copenhaver, "Magic and the Dignity of Man," 295–320. Copenhaver summarizes the thesis of this article in a companion essay, stating, "For three centuries after he died in 1494, the *Oration* was little more than an entry in lists of Pico's books until post-Kantian

The evidence, however, upon which such a claim is based deserves further scrutiny. While it is arguable that other works of Pico, most notably his letters, have had a more illustrious history of separate early printed editions than the *Oratio*, and for this reason more likely enjoyed a wider exposure among sixteenth- and seventeenth-century *literati*, it is possible to trace a less obvious (and perhaps even clandestine) history of influence exerted by the *Oratio*, one that begins shortly after the work's posthumous publication in the *Opera* of 1496.[144]

Although Pico never publicly presented his *Oratio*, it enjoyed a splendid oratorical history as a frequently plagiarized text in the genre of Renaissance papal court oratory. A great irony lies in the fact that although Innocent VIII's papal ban prevented the *Oratio* from being presented by Pico in Rome, it would, in parts, be presented publicly to no fewer than four popes by papal orators who mined the work in composing homilies for the papal liturgies. We must conclude that, in some sense, Pico's intention for a presentation of the *Oratio* at a *congressus* presided by the pope was fulfilled, although in a way unimagined by Pico. To be sure, at least four of the first six popes of the sixteenth century would be treated to homilies featuring unacknowledged borrowings from the *Oratio*. It is unknown whether the first of the group, Alexander VI, who rescinded his predecessor Innocent VIII's excommunication of Pico shortly before the latter's death, would have recognized the substantial sections of the *Oratio* incorporated into Tommaso Inghirami's papal sermon *Oration in Praise of All the Saints* (*In laudem omnium sanctorum oratio*) delivered on All Saints in 1497.[145] The Spanish Augustinian, Dionisio Vázquez, would

historians invented the first elements of the interpretation now common in college textbooks" ("The Secret of Pico's *Oration*," 56). A similar assessment is offered by Marc Laureys in "The Reception of Giovanni Pico in the Low Countries," in *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Convegno internazionale di studi nel cinquecentesimo anniversario della morte (1494–1994)*, 625–40, at 639.

144 It is difficult to judge how well-known Pico's *Oratio* was prior to the publication of the *Opera*. On the one hand, in his editorial preface to the *Oratio* in the *Opera*, Gianfrancesco Pico indicates that the text of the *Oratio* was circulated only among Pico's friends. On the other hand, Gianfrancesco Pico concedes that he would not have published it without being incited by the overtures of illustrious men (*nec nos nisi celebratorum hominum crebris adhortamentis excitati*) (*Opera omnia*, 313). More positive assessments of the circulation of the *Oratio* in the early sixteenth century are described by other commentators; Farmer notes that the *Oratio* "circulated widely in manuscript" (*Syncretism*, 154). The *Oratio* was present in all of the early editions of the *Opera*; see Di Napoli, *Giovanni Pico*, 521–2; Roulier, *Jean Pic*, 10–11; and, more recently, Quaquarelli and Zanardi, *Pichiana*, at 101–24 (§§1–3) and 175–91 (§§18–24).

145 See John W. O'Malley, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court, c. 1450–1521* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1979), 132–3.

similarly borrow from Pico in his Ash Wednesday sermon to Julius II in 1513.[146] Julius II's successor, Leo X, would be treated a year later to the unacknowledged borrowings from Pico's *Oratio* in the Passion Sunday homily presented by Augustus Philippus Florentinus in his sermon *On Truth* (*De veritate*).[147] For at least the second time in the early sixteenth century, sections from Pico's *Oratio* would arise clandestinely in an Ash Wednesday sermon for the papal court, when Hieronymus Arzius presented his *Oration Concerning the Nature, War, and Peace of Both Kinds of Men* (*Oratio de natura, bello, et pace utriusque hominis*) to Clement VIII in 1531.[148]

It is significant that the sections of the *Oratio* subject to these unacknowledged borrowings by Renaissance papal orators were texts from the early part of the *Oratio*, which set forth the celebrated philosophical anthropology that today dominates much of the interest of readers and commentators on Pico. In discussing the human condition, these papal orators mined Pico's text – in many cases quoting it verbatim – to defend and praise the dignity of human beings. Admittedly, the liturgical context of religious oratory of necessity ruled out some of the technical language of scholastic treatises; nevertheless, substantive discussions of theological and philosophical topics were allowed as long as they could be placed in the service of the pastoral function of a sermon. For present purposes, it is sufficient to point out that the clandestine literary existence of the anthropological sections of the *Oratio* in the oratory of the papal court in the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth century testifies to the early recognition of the significance of the view of human nature articulated by Pico in the *Oratio*. The claim that the privileging of the *Oratio* in light of its views on human dignity is a creation of late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century historians must be revised. These papal orators found in Pico's *Oratio* significant discussions about the human condition, and the incorporation of its passages into their sermons before the papal court anticipates the increased interest in the *Oratio* by modern and contemporary intellectual historians.

[146] See John O'Malley, "An Ash Wednesday Sermon on the Dignity of Man for Pope Julius II, 1513," in *Essays Presented to Myron P. Gilmore*, vol. 1, *History*, ed. Sergio Bertelli and Gloria Ramakus (Florence: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1978), 193–207, and O'Malley, *Praise and Blame*, 112.

[147] See John W. O'Malley, "Preaching for the Popes," in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. Charles Trinkaus and Heiko Oberman (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 428, and O'Malley, *Praise and Blame*, 111–12.

[148] See O'Malley, *Praise and Blame*, 136, and O'Malley, "Preaching for the Popes," 424–6.

It is worth noting that the unacknowledged appropriation of texts of the *Oratio* in the early sixteenth century was not limited to the borrowings of the aforementioned papal orators, since at least one philosopher, without attribution, reshaped the *Oratio* into dedicatory prefaces for two of his treatises on natural philosophy. The scholastically trained Hieronymus Picus (no relation to Pico) took substantive portions from the early part of the *Oratio* dealing with the possibility of human beings either acquiring the various forms of existing creatures or approaching divinity and used these texts to introduce his physical treatises.[149] Though little is known about the life of Hieronymus Picus, the fact that the scholastically trained philosopher would find Pico's work amenable as an introduction to scientific treatises testifies to the circulation of the *Oratio*.[150] Later in the sixteenth century the Spanish friar Pedro Malón de Chaide (1530–89) incorporated early parts of the *Oratio* into his *La conversion de la Magdalena*, thereby situating Pico's thought within a Counter-Reformation project.[151]

[149] A discussion of the life and work of Hieronymus Picus can be found in Charles B. Schmitt, "Hieronymus Picus, Renaissance Platonism and the Calculator," *International Studies in Philosophy* 8 (1976): 57–80, reprinted as chap. 5 in Charles B. Schmitt, *The Aristotelian Tradition and Renaissance Universities* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984). The Latin prefatory epistles of Hieronymus Picus are presented as an appendix to the article, with the borrowed texts from the *Oratio* given in italics. After noting that "a large section of the prefatory letter is plagiarised from Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oratio*," Schmitt observes that "the author is essentially copying from that work which could have been available to him easily in any of several printed editions" (58, 61). For a discussion, see W. G. Craven, "Picus and Pico: A Case of Perceptive Plagiarism," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 49 (1987): 615–19.

[150] Although our account here has focused on unacknowledged direct borrowings from Pico's *Oratio*, other commentators have identified the influence of Pico's thought on numerous early Renaissance writers who were indebted intellectually to Pico's notion of the human condition as presented in the *Oratio*. Arguing that "Pico's *Oratio* became a popular and influential work, often quoted and imitated," Jill Kraye has seen Pico's influence in early sixteenth-century thinkers, including Juan Luis Vives, Filippo Beroaldo, and Charles de Bovelles ("Moral Philosophy," 313–4). In Gianfrancesco Pico's well-known work, *De imaginatione*, published in 1501, Pico's nephew appears to inherit his uncle's view that the polarities of divinity and bestiality are the end points for the range of human becoming. For a discussion, see Jan R. Veenstra, "The Subtle Knot: Robert Kilwardby and Gianfrancesco Pico on the Imagination," in *Imagination in the Later Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, ed. Lodi Nauta and Detlev Pätzold (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 14–15. For a discussion of Barthelemy de Chasseneuz's use of Pico's *Oratio* in his 1529 *Catalogus gloriae mundi*, see Donald R. Kelley, "Law," in *The Cambridge History of Political Thought: 1450–1700*, ed. J. H. Burns and Mark Goldie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 78.

[151] For a comparison of Pico's Latin text with Malón de Chaide's Spanish text, see Davy Carozza, "Another Italian Source for *La Magdalena* of Malón de Chaide," *Italica* 41 (1964): 91–8.

In the present paper, I have sought to locate Pico's most famous work within the trajectory of three traditional academic exercises: the *quaestiones disputatae*, the collection and defense of *sententiae*, and the techniques of dialectical interpretation. These three traditions were widely practiced as part of late medieval academic culture, and I have shown that Pico's plans for his Roman debate imply a commitment to these three traditional exercises. Further, the location of Pico's proposal in these traditions can limit the range of interpretations of Pico's plans and views that seem plausible or defensible. When approached as a late incarnation of the exercise of disputed questions, Pico's proposal to defend his theses seems less like an exhibition of vainglory on an unprecedented scale and more like a traditional philosophical and theological affair. When the *900 Theses* are approached as a textbook compendium of *sententiae* or a *florilegium*, the novelty of Pico's publication dissipates quickly, for collections of authoritative opinions were standard ways of organizing philosophical and theological topics.

Finally, when the dialectical character of Pico's procedure is recognized, it becomes unnecessary to ascribe to Pico a personal endorsement of the context within which each authoritative opinion is taken or to ascribe to him any particular rendering of the authoritative opinion apart from the sense that he finds in it. Pico employed the dialectical techniques of interpretation to use authorities to support his own positions, which was a standard practice among both ancient and medieval dialecticians. On this view, Pico's own philosophical views appear less Protean than one might initially be led to believe. I have argued that Pico's *Oratio* is deserving of a reading that accounts for the whole of the text and that the celebrated defense of the human condition in the early part of the work ought to be examined in light of the later philosophical curriculum that Pico defends. In short, I have tried to paint an alternative portrait of Pico; instead of a standard view that presents him as a syncretic concordist of all religious and philosophical views who believes that all traditions possess the same truth, I have argued for an approach that shows Pico committed to a dialectical method that finds confirmation in various traditions of both philosophical truths and the truths of Christianity. This reading allows us to take seriously Pico's concession in the *Oratio* that the discipline of philosophy cannot bring ultimate peace, although philosophy is a necessary component of his account of ultimate deification. When read in light of these three traditions, the *Oratio* contains Pico's highly original solution to a significant medieval problem concerning the possibility of ultimate human deification. Finally, the great interest among

present-day commentators and readers of Pico's account of the human condition is not a recent occurrence, as we have seen, for early sixteenth-century intellectuals appropriated the views of the *Oratio* on the human condition in diverse ways.[152]

[152] I would like to thank Michelle Dougherty, Lawrence Masek, Perry Cahall, and Matthew Ponesse for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

7

Pico on Magic and Astrology

Sheila J. Rabin

Pico studied philosophy at Ferrara, Padua, and Paris. At all three universities he would have been exposed to ideas about magic and astrology, which were both mainstream subjects in natural philosophy. Astrology studied the effects of the motions of the heavenly bodies; magic sought to manipulate nature; astral magic combined the two. Pico also would have learned about them through his humanist pursuits. In his earlier writings, Pico's acceptance of magic is clear; his acceptance of astrology is also discernible. Pico had a solid theoretical knowledge of both subjects, but he was not a practitioner of either.

Astronomy and astrology were taught in three curricula in the universities that Pico attended: mathematics, philosophy, and medicine.[1] Astrology was part of the Aristotelian worldview of the universities. Although Aristotle had not written about astrology, he did suggest that an immutable, immaterial heaven affected all existence.[2] Ptolemy not only

[1] Despite its extensive polemic against the Renaissance in general and against Pico in particular, Lynn Thorndike's *A History of Magic and Experimental Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923–58) is an important guide to medieval and Renaissance thought about astrology and magic; vol. 4 deals with the fifteenth century. The most thorough history of astrology is Jim Tester, *A History of Western Astrology* (Woodbridge, England: Boydell Press, 1987). Tester's book, however, is best in the early chapters. J. D. North, *Horoscopes and History* (London: Warburg Institute and University of London, 1986), traces the history of the mathematical principles behind the practice of astrology and shows their applications in horoscopes. For the Renaissance period, see Eugenio Garin, *Astrology in the Renaissance: The Zodiac of Life*, trans. Carolyn Jackson and June Allen, rev. trans. Eugenio Garin and Clare Robertson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), and Wayne Shumaker, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance: A Study in Intellectual Patterns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), chap. 1. On astrology in the university curriculum, see Paul F. Grendler, *The Universities of the Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), chap. 12.

[2] See, e.g., *De caelo*, trans. J. L. Stocks, in vol. 2 of *The Works of Aristotle*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930; repr., 1970), 1.9 279a19–279b1.

wrote the authoritative textbook of astronomy, the *Almagest*, but he also wrote the major textbook of astrology, the *Tetrabiblos*. However, for him these were not separate subjects; rather they were the two sides of the study of the heavens, the theoretical and the practical.[3] Isidore of Seville, in the seventh century, first gave them the names "astronomy" and "astrology,"[4] but those words were often interchangeable in the medieval and Renaissance periods.

Unlike astrology, magic as an intellectual pursuit was not part of the curriculum at the universities. It was, however, often studied in relationship to subjects in philosophy and medicine. Both Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas had written about magic, and the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secret of Secrets* was an accepted part of the Aristotelian corpus in the universities.[5] Siraisi noted that in the influential medical curriculum at such universities as Padua, there was widespread "[i]nterest in the beneficent manipulation of astral and occult forces for therapeutic purposes."[6] But as Kieckhefer maintained, most importantly for the study of magic as an intellectual pursuit, "the universities produced educated individuals who could go on to study learned forms of magic or 'occult sciences' even if these were not subjects for formal study."[7]

Humanism contributed to the intellectual pursuit of magic through the discovery, translation, and study of ancient texts. Ficino's translation of the Hermetic texts was the most famous of these.[8] But while important, humanism was not the only or necessarily the greatest facilitator of the acceptance of magic. In general, the Neoplatonic beliefs in the animate universe and in the macrocosm/microcosm analogy were crucial. As Kieckhefer stated, they "disposed its adherents to see the cosmos as a *living* system with complex and unpredictable influences, not as a system of mechanical and regular influences on which a science of prediction might be based."[9]

[3] Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, trans. and ed. F. E. Robbins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), 3.

[4] Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum sive originum Libri XX*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911; repr., 1966), 3.27.

[5] On magic in the universities, see Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), chap. 6.

[6] Nancy G. Siraisi, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 152.

[7] Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 117.

[8] Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964; repr., 1979), chaps. 1–4, was crucial in bringing this to the attention of modern readers.

[9] Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 130.

Both astrology and magic were divided into two kinds: thinkers referred to natural and judicial astrology. Natural astrology studied the heavenly bodies and made predictions mostly in the areas of the weather and medicine. Judicial astrology dealt with predictions of human as opposed to natural occurrences, involving both societies and individuals, based on the configurations of the heavens. There was no fixed line of demarcation, however, between natural and judicial astrology. For example, the issue of nativities or horoscopes was problematic. They could be seen as aids for medical care, much as a medical history is used today, or they could be seen as predictive tools that interfered with divine providence and human free will.

There is a further difficulty in trying to separate those who supported natural astrology from those who claimed to oppose astrology altogether. The case of fourteenth-century thinker Nicholas Oresme, an important voice against astrology and a major influence on Pico, is instructive. In his *Livre de Divinacions* (Book on Divinations), Oresme claimed that studying the movements of the stars and planets had limited validity for making predictions about great events, medical procedures, and nativities, though when it came to the weather, much like modern complaints against weather forecasters, Oresme asserted that astrology was worthless.[10]

One important reason a strong opponent of astrology like Oresme could accept some astrological influence and knowledge was that the idea of the constitution of the sky was different than it became later. Until late in the seventeenth century, most writers on astronomy assumed that the heavens were as Aristotle depicted them – immaterial.[11] Writers did not always view the celestial bodies or the radiations from such bodies – light and heat – as physical, and it was, therefore, possible to accept nonphysical effects of those bodies. This point must be borne in mind when looking at the development of Pico's attitude toward astrology.

[10] Nicole Oresme, *Livre de Divinacions*, trans. G. W. Coopland, in G. W. Coopland, *Nicole Oresme and the Astrologers: A Study of His* Livre de Divinacions (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1952), 55, 57.

[11] On the development of the idea of a physical heaven, see Harry A. Wolfson, "The Problem of the Souls of the Spheres from the Byzantine Commentaries on Aristotle through the Arabs and St. Thomas to Kepler," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 16 (1962): 65–94; Richard C. Dales, "Medieval De-Animation of the Heavens," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 41 (1980): 531–50; and E. J. Dijksterhuis, *The Mechanization of the World Picture: Pythagoras to Newton*, trans. C. Dikshoorn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961; repr., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

Likewise, not all magic was acceptable. Good magic was natural or, as Walker termed it, "spiritual magic."[12] Natural magic treated what were perceived as occult qualities within nature; demonic magic called on demons for aid and often sought change that was not perceived as natural.[13]

Magic was an important topic in the *Conclusions*. Pico declared that "magic is the noblest part of natural science."[14] Among the 402 theses from "historical" figures, many of the Pythagorean, Chaldean, Hermetic,[15] and Kabbalist theses dealt with magic. Among the theses "according to his own opinion," section 9, comprising twenty-six theses, was devoted to magic, and section 10, comprising thirty-one theses, was devoted to Orphic magic. But many other theses, especially among those on *The Book of Causes*, mathematics, Zoroaster and his Chaldean commentators, and Kabbalah, also dealt with magic.

From the perspective of Pico's natural philosophy, his use of Kabbalah in the *Conclusions* was his most original and interesting contribution. In fact, Copenhaver has plausibly argued not only that Kabbalah was central to the *Conclusions* but that even the number of theses had Kabbalistic significance.[16] Kabbalah was a Jewish form of mysticism that was probably Neoplatonic in its origins.[17] The word means "that which is received" or

[12] D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic: From Ficino to Campanella* (London: Warburg Institute, 1958; repr., Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975).

[13] Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), contains an English description and Latin edition of Clm 849 from the Bavarian State Library, a handbook of demonic magic.

[14] Pico, *Conclusions*, ed. and trans. S. A. Farmer, in Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486): The Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems* (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998), 495.

[15] Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 84–116, suggested that the writings of Hermes Trismegistus were the critical source for Pico's views on magic, as they had been for Ficino's views, and that they made Pico into Ficino's disciple, but as Farmer and Brian Copenhaver show, Pico was not indebted to Ficino for his ideas on magic, and the Hermetic corpus was a minor source for Pico. See Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 118–32, and Brian Copenhaver, "Magic and the Dignity of Man: De-Kanting Pico's *Oration*," in *The Italian Renaissance in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Allen J. Grieco, Michael Rocke, and Fiorella Gioffredi Superbi (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2002), 295–320, 318.

[16] Brian Copenhaver, "Number, Shape, and Meaning in Pico's Christian Cabala: The Upright *Tsade*, the Closed *Mem*, and the Gaping Jaws of *Azazel*," in *Natural Particulars: Nature and the Disciplines in Renaissance Europe*, ed. Anthony Grafton and Nancy Siraisi (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 25–76, at 57–8.

[17] On Kabbalah and its history see Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1954; repr., 1961), and Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem:

"tradition," and its adherents believed that Kabbalah was an oral tradition revealed to Moses alongside the written law at Mount Sinai. Part of the tradition is highly literary, focusing on the words and letters of the Torah, and this feature made it especially appealing to humanists like Pico.

The major works of Kabbalah available to Pico were *Sefer Yetsirah* (Book of Creation), written between the third and the sixth centuries; *Sefer ha-Bahir* (Book of Illumination), attributed to the Midrashic rabbi Nehunya ben ha-Kanah but in fact a twelfth-century compilation; and *Zohar* ([Book of] Splendor), attributed to the second-century mystic rabbi Simeon ben Yohai but probably written by Moses de Leon in the thirteenth century. When he wrote the *Conclusions*, Pico also had available to him works by medieval Jewish commentators such as Abraham Abulafia, Azriel ben Menahem of Gerona, and Menahem Recanati as well as several anonymous works.[18] Most of the works were translated for Pico from the Hebrew by his teacher, Flavius Mithridates, a converted Jew and scholar of Kabbalah. Mithridates made marginal notations with his translation to guide his pupil and developed the argument that Kabbalah proved the truth of Christianity.[19] Indeed, Pico claimed he was presenting Kabbalistic theses "strongly confirming the Christian religion using the Hebrew wisemen's own principles."[20] His ninth magic thesis, which got him into trouble with the Catholic Church, declared, "There is no science that assures us more of the divinity of Christ than magic and Cabala."[21] This sentiment was repeated in the *Oration*, the *Apology*, and the *Heptaplus*.[22]

While Kabbalists, like other mystics, frequently sought the mystical union with the godhead, Kabbalistic principles also aimed at reforming

Keter Publishing, 1974; repr., New York: New American Library, 1978). Moshe Idel's *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), also an important work, focuses more on the devotional and magical aspects of the tradition.

[18] See Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 60–4. This study, written by a scholar of Kabbalah, is the most extensive work on Pico and Kabbalah and is important in my understanding of the subject.

[19] Ibid., 69.

[20] Pico, *Conclusions*, 517.

[21] Ibid., 497.

[22] Pico, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, trans. Elizabeth Livermore Forbes, in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 249, 253; *Apologia*, in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Gianfrancesco Pico, *Opera omnia*, 2 vols. (Basel, 1557; reprinted, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1969), 1:180; *Heptaplus*, trans. Douglas Carmichael, in *On the Dignity of Man, On Being and the One, Heptaplus* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 158.

the world. The human being thus became an active agent influencing the divine world, and the Kabbalist turned magician. Furthermore, as Idel noted, "An archmagician, the theurgical Kabbalist does not need external help or grace; his way of operating – namely, the Torah – enables him to be independent; he looks not so much for salvation by the intervention of God as for God's redemption by human intervention."[23] The Kabbalist was an active operator in improving the world.

Among the "Theses according to His Own Opinion" in the *Conclusions*, Pico frequently invoked Kabbalah within the magical theses. Kabbalistic references appear in the mathematical theses (7a: 67, 68), Zoroastrian theses (8: 14), magical theses (9: 7, 9, 15, 18, 22, 25, 26), and the Orphic theses (10: 4, 10, 13, 15, 21). In this regard, the magical theses are particularly interesting. Pico began this set of theses by defining magic and what was acceptable in it. The first two theses established the two kinds of magic: "All magic that is in use among the moderns, and which the church justly exterminates, has no firmness, no foundation, no truth, because it . . . depends on the enemies of the first truth, *those powers of darkness*, which pour the darkness of falsehood over poorly disposed intellects," but "[n]atural magic is permitted and not prohibited."[24]

Pico maintained that Kabbalah had an important role in natural magic. He declared that "[n]o magical operation can be of any efficacy unless it has annexed to it a work of Cabala, explicit or implicit." Moreover, "The nature of that which is the horizon of temporal eternity is next to the *magus*, but above him, and proper to it is the Cabala." Further, "No names that mean something, insofar as those names are singular and taken *per se*, can have power in a magical work, unless they are Hebrew names, or closely derived from Hebrew." And he concluded his magic theses by noting, "Just as through the influence of the first agent, if that influence is individual and immediate, something is achieved that is not attained through the mediation of causes, so through a work of Cabala, if it is the pure and immediate Cabala, something is achieved to which no magic attains."[25]

In his first magical thesis, Pico denied the efficacy of demonic magic, but in the magic theses relating to Kabbalah he added that natural magic had no power without Kabbalah. It made natural magic effective and guaranteed that it was not demonic. Unlike the other forms of primal

[23] Idel, *Kabbalah*, 179.
[24] Pico, *Conclusions*, 495.
[25] Ibid., 499 (no. 15), 501 (nos. 18, 22), 503 (no. 26).

magic that Pico wrote about in the *Conclusions*, Kabbalist magic was not pagan. In fact, Kabbalistic magic stemmed from the divine word, and this shielded it against any demonic tendencies or influences.[26]

Pico's Kabbalist theses went beyond his intent of supporting Christian doctrine. He truly created a Christian Kabbalah by showing how the principles of Kabbalah could be applied to Christian dogma.[27] For example, thesis 14 states, "By the letter <ש>, that is, *shin*, which mediates in the name of Jesus, it is indicated to us Cabalistically that the world then rested perfectly, as though in its perfection, when *Yod* was conjoined with *Vav* – which happened in Christ, who was the true Son of God, and man."[28] The Hebrew name of Jesus, Yeshu, is formed by those three Hebrew consonants; the middle, weighty, letter ש is in a pivotal position flanked by two similar, light, letters י and ו, both of which can also be used, at times interchangeably, as vowels. Here Pico used Hebrew letters in Jesus's name to confirm a Christian idea. This thesis started a series of similarly configured Kabbalistic statements.

Among the Kabbalistic theses with magical themes are four that dealt with astrology:

> 11>48. Whatever other Cabalists say, I say that the ten spheres correspond to the ten numerations [*sefirot*] like this: so that starting from the edifice, Jupiter corresponds to the fourth, Mars to the fifth. . . .
>
> 11>49. Anyone who knows the correspondence of the Ten Commandments through the conjunction of astrological truth with theological truth will see from the foundation that I set out in the preceding conclusion, whatever other Cabalists say, that the first commandment corresponds to the first numeration. . . .
>
> 11>50. When the Cabalists say that sons should be sought from the seventh and the eighth, those petitions in the inferior *merkabah* are to be interpreted this way: so that one is asked to grant them, the other not to prohibit them. And which one grants and which one prohibits anyone who is knowledgeable in astrology and Cabala can understand from the preceding conclusions.
>
> 11>51. Just as the full moon was in Solomon, so the full sun was in the true Messiah, who was Jesus. And concerning the diminished correspondence in Zedekiah anyone can conjecture, if he is profound in the Cabala.[29]

Thus, unsurprisingly, astrology was integral to the magical-Kabbalistic outlook that Pico was promoting in the *Conclusions*. This was reinforced

[26] See Copenhaver, "Number, Shape, and Meaning in Pico's Christian Cabala," 37.
[27] See Wirszubski, *Encounter with Jewish Mysticism*, 151.
[28] Pico, *Conclusions*, 527.
[29] Ibid., 541.

in his magical theses when he wrote, "No power exists in heaven or earth seminally and separated that the magician cannot actuate and unite,"[30] a clear reference to astral magic, the ability of the magician to use the heavenly bodies to manipulate events. So when Pico ended his *Conclusions* with the declaration, "Just as true astrology teaches us to read in the book of God, so the Cabala teaches us to read in the book of the Law,"[31] he was not adding a new element, and "true astrology" did not mean astronomy devoid of astrology but the natural astrology that was part of the other divine book, the book of nature.[32]

That this was what Pico meant by "true astrology" was reinforced in *Heptaplus*, because, as it concerned itself with the structure of the universe, we would expect that astrology would play a greater role there if Pico accepted it. In chapter 3 of the second exposition Pico wrote:

> If we seek the elements in the sky, we consider as earth the moon, the lowest and most ignoble of all the stars, just as earth is lowest of all the elements, and very similar to the earth in the opacity of its substance and in its blemishes. Then for water we take Mercury, a shifting star that changes its form, and therefore called by Lucan the lord of the tide; for air, Venus, giving life by its tempered warmth; and for fire, the Sun, for very obvious reasons. Then, in inverse order, Mars for fire; Jupiter, related in nature to Venus, for air; for water, Saturn, aged by pernicious cold; it remains for us to call the eighth and unwandering sphere earth, as the very order of the computation demands.[33]

In the next chapter he elaborated on the effects of the celestial order:

> Jupiter is hot, Mars is hot, and the sun is hot, but the heat of Mars is angry and violent, that of Jupiter beneficent, and in the sun we see both the angry violence of Mars and the beneficent quality of Jupiter, that is, a certain

[30] Ibid., 497.

[31] Ibid., 553.

[32] The arguments that Pico did not change his mind about astrology – maintaining either that he never really accepted it (see Garin, introduction to *Disputationes*, 1:7–8, in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinitricem*, 2 vols., ed. Eugenio Garin [Florence: Vallechi, 1946–52], and Garin, *Astrology in the Renaissance*, 80) or that he never rejected it (see Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, 54–57; Tester, *A History of Western Astrology*, 209; and Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 115) – are unsustainable. For a summary of those arguments and a refutation, see my "Unholy Astrology: Did Pico Always View It That Way?" in *Paracelsian Moments: Science, Medicine, and Astrology in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Gerhild Scholz Williams and Charles D. Gunnoe Jr. (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2002), 151–63. For an alternative view of Pico's transformation that emphasizes the *Heptaplus* as a turning point, see Fernand Roulier, *Jean Pic de la Mirandole (1463–1494): Humaniste, philosophe et théologien* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1989), 314.

[33] Giovanni Pico, *Heptaplus*, trans. Douglas Carmichael, in *On the Dignity of Man, On Being and the One, Heptaplus* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 97–8.

> tempered and intermediate nature blended of these. Jupiter is propitious, Mars of ill omen, the sun partly good and partly bad, good in its radiation, bad in conjunction. Aries is the house of Mars, Cancer the dignity of Jupiter: the sun, reaching its greatest height in Cancer and its greatest power in Aries, makes clear its kinship with both planets.[34]

In these passages we see the unquestioned acceptance of several elements of an astrological outlook: the identification of the planets in a geocentric universe with the elements, earth, water, air, and fire; the attribution of characteristics of the human personalities to the heavenly bodies; the belief that the appearance of a planet in the sky portends good or ill; the idea that planetary aspects, here a conjunction, can change the effect of the planet; the pairing of the planets with signs of the zodiac. All of the ideas expressed here would be compatible with natural astrology, which must have been Pico's idea of "true astrology."

On the other hand, in chapter 3 of the fifth exposition, he wondered:

> How are the stars placed in the firmament? As its more noble parts, as the Peripatetics think, or like the animals in their spheres . . . , as Eusebius the Mede and Diodorus would have it? This point would require conversation with the astrologers, who, from Moses' statement that God placed the stars for signs, draw support for their science of divining by the stars and of foreknowing future events. This science not only has been sharply criticized by Christians like Basil, who rightly called it a busy deceit, and by Apollinarius, Cyril, and Diodorus, but also was spat upon by the good Peripatetics. Aristotle despised it and, what is more, according to Theodoretus, it was repudiated by Pythagoras and Plato and all the Stoics.[35]

This is a strong condemnation of astrology, although it would be surprising if Pico accepted the idea that the Stoics, many of whom believed in astrology as a means of perceiving their fate in order to accept it, belonged among those who repudiated astrology. Astrology was also unknown by Aristotle, Pythagoras, and Plato, as it did not enter Greece until the fourth century BCE, so they could not have expressed an opinion about it. Nevertheless, this does not contradict his earlier statements; the "science of divining by the stars and of foreknowing future events" describes judicial astrology.

Both the *Conclusions* and *Heptaplus* were published during Pico's lifetime, so it is unsurprising that the posthumous publication of his *Disputations against Judicial Astrology* caused an uproar among his contemporaries.

[34] Ibid., 100–1.
[35] Ibid., 132.

The *Disputations* went beyond a condemnation of judicial astrology and attacked tenets of natural astrology as well.[36] Furthermore, though this work is called *Disputations*, it is not a scholastic disputation, presenting ideas and critically examining them; rather it is a very powerful, one-sided polemic. As with his earlier works, he showed mastery of a plethora of sources, but his knowledge of astrology, like his knowledge of magic, was learned from books and was totally theoretical.

Pico began his polemic with an argument from authority, for astrology was "that art which predicts future occurrences from the stars, the deceit of greedy liars, forbidden by civil and religious laws, sustained by human curiosity, mocked by philosophers, cultivated by quacks, suspected by every one of the best and the wisest."[37] In book 1, he claimed that astrology had been condemned by emperors, prophets, and popes. Among the authorities in pagan antiquity, he mentioned Pythagoras, Plutarch, Democritus, Seneca, and Cicero, and he stated that "astrology contains so much nonsense that Epicurus, who is crazy with respect to many things, could not give his assent."[38] As in the *Heptaplus*, he put Plato and Aristotle among the opponents of astrology, writing that "the princes of philosophy considered it unworthy of mention in anything they wrote, condemning it more by remaining silent about it in all their philosophy than anyone else did in speech or writing."[39] Among the Church Fathers, he claimed the support of Augustine, Ambrose, Eusebius, Tertullian, and Origen; among more recent opponents, he placed Albertus Magnus, Nicholas Oresme, Angelo Poliziano, and Marsilio Ficino. He dismissed Ptolemy as an authority by claiming that when he was correct it was because

[36] The *Disputations* was edited by his nephew Gianfrancesco and by Giovanni Mainardi, both strong opponents of astrology, and as Farmer, argued, there is the possibility that they tampered with the text (*Syncretism in the West*, 151–79). At this point, the evidence is circumstantial, and the *Disputations* and other posthumously published works contain philosophical ideas that the editors repudiated. For example, as H. Darrel Rutkin pointed out, Pico's positive attitude toward Aristotle in the *Disputations* was very different from his nephew's. "Astrology, Natural Philosophy and the History of Science c. 1250–1700: Studies toward an Interpretation of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2002), 371.

[37] Pico, *Disputationes*, 1:40: "... quae de sideribus eventura pronunciat, fraudem mercenariae mendacitatis, legibus interdictam et civilibus et pontificiis, humana curiositate retentam, irrisam a philosophis, cultam a circulatoribus, optimo cuique prudentissimoque suspectam ..." (lines 5–9). All English translations from this work are by the author.

[38] Ibid., 1:48: "... quantum insaniae continet astrologia, cui nec multa delirans assentiri potuit Epicurus!" (lines 7–8).

[39] Ibid., 1:48: "Plato et Aristoteles, philosophiae principes, indignam putaverunt de qua verbum aliquando facerent, tota sua philosophia plus eam silendo quam quisque voce scriptisve condemnantes" (lines 9–12).

he followed Aristotle, but his astrology resulted from his deviating from Aristotle.[40]

Thorndike correctly noted that Pico "had a wide, if not exhaustive, acquaintance with past literature germane to his theme, but the use he makes of it is that of the advocate and dialectical disputant . . . rather than that of the impartial historian of ideas."[41] Pico presented his sources not for the purpose of examining them critically but as a basis of support from which he could proceed to a polemical examination of the issue. Thus, the list of sources is one-sided. In book 1, he presented the ideas of very few supporters of astrology, and he did so only to impugn their credibility. The argument that Plato and Aristotle condemned astrology by their silence was a rhetorical legerdemain that he used because his argument from authority would have been greatly weakened for his contemporaries had he not been able to cite the greatest of the pagan authorities. Pico may have believed that Plato and Aristotle tacitly supported his position, but, as noted above, their silence was due to the fact that astrology as a discipline had not yet entered Greece when they wrote. As Pico made this error in both the *Heptaplus* and the *Disputations*, he may not have been aware of this chronology. Moreover, both Plato and Aristotle had ideas concerning celestial governance of the world that were used to support the belief in astrology. Pico strengthened his argument by correctly denying that two astrological works attributed to Aristotle, *Secret of Secrets* and *On the Properties of the Elements*, were written by him, but he gave no reasons for this denial.[42] Furthermore, he denied that astrological treatises traditionally attributed to Albertus Magnus were written by him.[43] Aristotle and Albertus were major philosophical authorities who wrote about the stars. Pico's claim that neither supported astrology and his denial that Ptolemy's contributions in natural philosophy were original with him were intended to bolster Pico's assertions with respect to his

[40] For example, see ibid., 1:70, 72: "Sed demus ei hanc veniam loquendi. Aristoteles ipse, quem probat, quomodo ei dabit a motu oriri genus theologicam, cum et ipse Deus, quatenus primi motus auctor et causa, non a theologo, sed a philosopho investigetur? Reliqua etiam aut falsa, aut quae facile videas ab homine prolata parum perito gnaroque philosophiae" (lines 27–30, 1–3).

[41] Thorndike, *A History of Magic*, 4:530.

[42] Pico, *Disputationes*, 1:64. On pseudo-Aristotelian works, see Charles Schmitt and Dilwyn Knox, eds., *Pseudo-Aristoteles Latinus: A Guide to Latin Works Falsely Attributed to Aristotle before 1500* (London: Warburg Institute, 1985).

[43] Pico, *Disputationes*, 1:66. For a discussion of the controversy over the authorship of the *Speculum astronomiae*, see James A. Weisheipl's review of the edition of that work in *Isis* 69 (1978): 616–18.

opposition to astrology; at the same time, he could claim that he did not oppose the study of astronomy.

Pico followed his argument from authority with an argument from reason in book 2. In particular, he claimed it was useless to try to guide either the private or the public realms by astrological predictions because the astrologers erred most of the time. He maintained that Francesco Sforza was the luckiest man in that era, and yet "[h]e always loathed or despised all astrologers; under no circumstances would he consult them about his military or domestic affairs."[44] On the other hand, Pino Ordelaffi, Pico's brother-in-law, "died in the very year Girolamo Manfredi, the renowned astrologer of our age, promised him a completely secure life."[45] Nor would Pico grant the possibility that Manfredi's inaccurate prediction may have been an aberration. "If any of their predictions ever turns out to be correct," he wrote, "it should be credited not to reasoning, which does not exist among them, but to accident and chance."[46]

An important theme in the *Disputations* dealt with the opposition Pico perceived between astrology and religion. In book 2, he castigated two important late medieval theologians, Roger Bacon and Pierre d'Ailly, for their attempts to use astrology to affirm the truth of the Christian faith. To the contrary, Pico claimed, "among the major writers on astrology I have read not one who would not subject religion, like all the rest of human affairs, to the constellations of the stars."[47] In fact, as he noted further, "if anyone would consider the matter with the proper measure of judgment, he will see no greater error offending the faith of true religion, for it would be just as impious to deny religion altogether as to deduce it from the sky through fatal necessity."[48] This is an ironic claim for someone who was condemned by the Church for proclaiming that Kabbalah proved

[44] Pico, *Disputationes*, 1:108: "Quis enim nostra aetate fortunatior Francisco Sfortia? . . . Cui tamen semper omnes astrologi, vel odio fuere, vel contemptui, nedum eos in suis rebus aut bellicis aut domesticis consiliarios adhiberet" (lines 16–22).

[45] Ibid., 1:164: "Pino Ordelapho, principe foroliviensi, cui Lucretia soror nupserat, quo anno obiit omnimodam vitae incolumitatem fuerat pollicitus Hieronymus Manfredus, astrologus nostra aetate singularis . . . " (lines 19–23).

[46] Ibid., 1:112: "Quod si quando ex illorum praedictionibus recte usu accidat, non in rationem, quae nulla sit apud eos, sed in temeritatem casumque esse referendum" (lines 13–15).

[47] Ibid., 1:128: "Ego vero ex scriptoribus astrologiae praecipuis neminem legi qui religionem et leges omnes, ut reliquas res humanas, constellationibus siderum non subiciat" (lines 13–15).

[48] Ibid., 1:134: ". . . si quis recto iudicii examine penset, videbit nullo magis errore pietatem verae religionis offendi, cum aeque sit impium totaliter nullam putare esse religionem et ex caelo fatali quadam eam necessitate deducere" (lines 4–7).

the divinity of Christ, but Pico did not perceive the irony. Here, as in his earlier works, Pico showed a strongly religious motivation, and this was perhaps the most important motivation behind the *Disputations*.[49]

Book 3 implicitly repudiated the nexus between heaven and human beings on earth that was the cornerstone of Pico's magic in the *Conclusions*. He denied any relationship between human affairs and the heavenly bodies in order to refute the astrologers' claim that the nature of celestial influence validated astrology. "[T]he astrologers have said that all motion here below depends on the motion of the sky," he noted, but "they have at once contradicted their principles, for from this would follow that common belief among philosophers that the whole sky is the cause of effects here below. However, a general cause does not distinguish among its effects. The question is not whether this or that effect follows from the general cause. On the contrary, the difference and variety in effects follow from proximate causes which are different and various."[50] For Pico, the effects of the sky on the earth were the same for all: the sky could not single out particular individuals for particular effects. Consequently, it could not determine particular events, actions, or decisions that would affect individual lives, and astrologers' attempts to understand and predict terrestrial affairs through contemplation of the stars were ill-founded.

Furthermore, Pico maintained, "since an astrologer looks at signs which are not signs, and thinks about causes which are not causes, he is, therefore, deceived."[51] A sign points to some meaningful occurrence outside itself. It can portend some future occurrence or be the effect of some past occurrence, but there has to be some causal connection between the sign and the occurrence it indicates. Otherwise, what we assert to be a sign is a sham. Since Pico denied that most terrestrial occurrences could be the effects of celestial occurrences, the stars could not be signs that indicate terrestrial occurrences.

Pico acknowledged that the heavenly bodies do affect the earth, but he severely restricted that effect. "This is the chief function of the sky, by

[49] Paul Oskar Kristeller correctly claimed that "[t]he basic impulse of his attack was religious" in *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1964), 68.

[50] Pico, *Disputationes*, 1:188: "... dixerunt astrologi motum omnem inferiorem a caeli motu dependere, statim dogmati suo contradixerunt, cum inde illud sequatur tritum apud philosophos, esse caelum universalem causam effectuum inferiorum. Causa autem universalis effectus non distinguit, neque cur hoc fiat, aut illud, quaeritur ab ea, sed a proximis causis, quae variae et differentes sunt, pro effectuum differentia et varietate..." (lines 19–26).

[51] Ibid., 1:358: "... quandoquidem astrologus signa respicit quae non sunt signa, causas speculatur quae non sunt causae, propterea fallitur" (lines 9–11).

which bodies are perfected and the living is disposed to life," he maintained, "the activity of circular motion, necessary not only in order to carry light and heat down to us and by turns more or less imparted to the earth with wonderful aptness, but also by motion to render us more capable of heat, which continuously flows from the moving bodies."[52] To Pico, motion, light, and heat were not occult influences but properties that exist in the nature of celestial bodies, and it was through the motion of the celestial bodies that heat and light were carried to the earth. Pico so wished to limit the influence of the sky over terrestrial occurrences that, despite all the arguments to the contrary, he denied that the force of the moon could cause the tides. He preferred such explanations as that motion was natural to water or the effect of winds and vapors.[53] Likewise he rejected the possibility that critical days, days on which it was believed that marked changes, such as excessive bleeding, took place in a patient's symptoms, were caused by the phases of the moon.[54] With his critiques of astrological claims concerning the moon's effects on the tides and on critical days in medicine, Pico was going beyond the critique of judicial astrology announced in the title of his book toward a critique of natural astrology as well.

Pico's heavens were not the mechanical, physical heavens of later astronomers, and neither were the light and motion that radiated from the heavenly bodies physical, but Pico denied the spiritual nature of the heavenly bodies. Against the astrological claim that the heavenly bodies were agents of the deity, Pico posited angels as those agents:

> [T]hose forces interceding between God and man should be superior to man, just as they are inferior to God. And it is not proper that what is accomplished by reason and counsel, as our affairs should, be arranged by the first author through the agency of non-rational beings. But just as he rules and regulates the elementary mass, inasmuch as it is inferior, through

[52] Ibid., 1:196: "Hoc est caeli munus praecipuum, quo corpora perficiuntur et viventia disponuntur ad vitam, praeter agitationem circularis motus, non modo necessarium ut lumen istud atque calorem devehat ad nos et per vices, oppotunitate mira, plus minus terris impartiatur, sed ut motos nos quoque calori reddat abiliores, qui de perpetue moto corpore iugiter emanat" (lines 20–7).

[53] Ibid., 1:306, 308, 310: "... quispiam dixerit hunc accedendi recedendique motum naturalem esse aquae.... Poterit autem cuipiam apparere satis aperta et sufficiens causa marinae reciprocationis, siquidem de tali terra et aqua vapores identidem quales diximus ventique suscitantur, unde in aqua fit ventus atque tumultus, praesertim quod ex motu impulsuque isto et vaporum admixtione calescit, quare locum quaerit ampliorem quo se diffundat.... aut cur necessarium praeter has causas addere Lunae motum, secum aquas deorsum etiam in sublime trahentem..." (lines 18–20, 9–14, 2–4).

[54] Ibid., 1:322: "Crisimos, quos latine iudicatorios dixeris, ad Lunam refelli tam falso quam superstitiose equidem non dubito..." (lines 3–4).

> the agency of the sky, which is superior, so it is proper that human affairs be governed by the mystery not of bodies but of angels, who by nature and dignity mediate between us and God. So when you descend from God to the earth, you descend by means of the sky; when you descend from God to man, you descend by means of angels.[55]

The sky was superior to the earth, according to Pico, but it was inferior to the human being, who had a rational soul. Only another being that possessed an intellectual nature could be superior to the human being or could act as an intermediary between the deity and the human being. The need for the action of angels was far from the mechanical world of Newton, as was Pico's belief that heavenly bodies were superior in composition to the earth, but Pico's celestial world had moved closer to a physical universe.[56]

In books 5 through 11, Pico attacked specific principles of astrological dogma. For example, he denied that conjunctions, that is, the times when two planets are very near each other, had any significance. He called it illogical to claim that they could influence events on earth: if two planets in conjunction had similar properties, their being in conjunction would have no special effect because of their redundant properties. If, on the other hand, the planets in conjunction had opposite properties, their being in conjunction would cancel out any effect they could have on earth.[57] Such ideas may not have been original with Pico, but by bringing

[55] Ibid., 1:442, 444: "...siquidem intercedentes istae causae inter Deum et nos, sicuti humiliores Deo, ita sublimiores hominibus esse debent; nec quae ratione consilioque peraguntur, qualia nostra sunt, per irrationalia corpora decet ab auctore primo disponi, sed quemadmodum ille elementariam molem, utpote deteriorem per caelestem, quae melior est, regit et moderatur, ita res humanas, non corporum sed angelorum mysterio, qui natura dignitateque mediant inter nos et Deum, convenit gubernari, quare, cum a Deo descendis ad terram, descende per caelum; cum a Deo descendis ad homines, descende per angelos" (lines 22–9, 1–4).

[56] Avery Dulles suggested that "[t]he evolution of Pico's attitude toward astrology seems to reflect an increasing emphasis on the physical aspect of the celestial world" in his *Princeps Concordiae: Pico della Mirandola and the Scholastic Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941), 85. See also Dijksterhuis, *The Mechanization of the World Picture*, 238–9, and my article, "Kepler's Attitude toward Pico and the Anti-Astrology Polemic," *Renaissance Quarterly* 50 (1997): 750–70.

[57] See Pico, *Disputationes*, 1:546: "Nam si qui simul coeunt planetae eadem essent proprietate, et vires haberent earundem rerum effectrices, profecto accessione facta duplicis radii effectus quoque duplicaretur; at cum contrariae sint repugnantisque naturae, qualis Iuppiter et Saturnus, necessario alter alterum impedit, et dum invicem suas frenant ligantque potestates, diversitate mixturae fit ut expectare ab eis nihil possimus nisi mediocre, quemadmodum omnia sunt quae ex extremorum mixtione dissultant; sicuti et ipsi dicere solent, cum sunt simul Saturnus et Mars, quamquam uterque noxius, uterque sit

together all the points he gleaned from his voluminous reading and using effective rhetoric, these books gave his work a power that other attacks on astrology lacked.

Books 6 and 8, frequently redundant in their attack, examined the three principal tools astrologers used to draw up their charts: aspects, the angle at which the rays from two celestial bodies hit the earth; the signs of the zodiac; and the houses into which astrologers divided the sky for the purpose of interpretation. About the aspects, Pico wrote:

> How absurd this is will readily be understood by anyone who has even tasted the rudiments of optics and philosophy since there is no one who does not know that the quality of the effect is distinguished from the quality of the ray and the nature of the irradiating bodies, not by the divergent dissemination of the ray.[58]

He denied that the signs of the zodiac were real or had any power: "[W]here the certain opportunity for astrology's falling into error lies is when they supposed that the signs had entirely independent powers and were so distributed not by human judgment but rather by nature."[59] According to Pico, all images in the sky were figments of the human imagination, but astrologers treated them as if they were formed by nature:

> This is not the work of nature, but the foolishness of fantasts or the delusion of dreamers, so that in the last analysis my definition of these concoctions would actually be the following: they have arisen from corrupt philosophy and poets' fables. Nevertheless, they are regarded by all the astrologers as if they were absolutely real things formed by the hand of God so to say, so that it is hardly believable into what superstitions this insanity has led them.[60]

maleficus, quia tamen diversam habent nocendi potestatem, non fieri ex illorum coniunctione maius aliquod malum et admirabile, sed frangi potius debilitarique alterius vires ab altero, ita ut nocere neuter possit dum nocere uterque pro suae naturae conditione contendit" (lines 3–18).

[58] Ibid., 2:26: "Quam enim hoc sit absurdum, qui optices philosophiaeque rudimenta vel delibaverit facile intelliget, cum nemo sit qui nesciat effectus qualitatem pro radii qualitate proque natura corporis irradiantis, non pro diversa radii circulatione, distingui" (lines 4–8).

[59] Ibid., 2:38: "Unde lapsus astrologis vel occasio certa fallendi super his decernentibus, quasi vires haberent omnino separatas, nec arbitrium illa, sed natura potius invicem divisisset" (lines 2–4).

[60] Ibid., 2:272, 274: "... non esse naturae haec opera, sed fingentium nugas, vel somniantium deliramenta, sic ut tandem recte de his inventis diffiniam: a corrupta philosophia et poetarum fabulis sunt exorta, quibus tamen quasi rebus verissimis et digito, ut sic dixerim, Dei formatis tantum astrologi omnes tribuunt ut vix credibile sit in quas superstitiones haec illos insania perduxerit" (lines 29–30, 1–5).

Books 6 and 8 impugned the astrological picture of the universe and its alleged influence on terrestrial affairs. Despite the redundancy and the awkward positioning of the books, they contained some of his strongest arguments. Pico claimed that a physical description of the universe must be drawn from the natural phenomena. He contended that the astrologers did not follow this rule. The houses and the signs of the zodiac were not observable; the effects of the aspects were not demonstrable. Therefore, Pico insisted they were not valid tools for astrological calculations. Pico's arguments made it impossible to do any kind of astrology, judicial or natural.

Analogies were used freely as a method of reasoning in astrology and other forms of the occult,[61] and Pico criticized the astrologers' use of analogy in book 10. According to this doctrine, each house, sign, or planet represented some human relationship or ambition, and from such analogies certain facets of an individual destiny could be learned. Pico perceived that such a use of analogy was based on a generalized conception of human inclinations, when in fact such inclinations may not be so generalized. This was particularly true with astrological interpretation using the houses. Most astrologers assigned the first house to the self. "The property of the second one concerns wealth," Pico remarked, "as [the astrologers] say nothing is closer to man; therefore, abutting the first, the second will signify riches. The reasoning is valid for those for whom nothing is more important than wealth. Nevertheless, many things may be closer and dearer to man, for example, the endowments of the soul and body, wisdom and health. For this reason they should have been signified by the second location rather than the sixth or the ninth. Not to mention that, among other things, parents, one's wife, friends, sons, and glory are preferred as more important and closer than money, just not among the type of men who call themselves astrologers."[62] Individual

[61] Brian Vickers took up the issue of analogy in occult reasoning for a later period in his article "Analogy versus Identity: The Rejection of Occult Symbolism, 1580–1680," in *Occult and Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance*, ed. Brian Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 95–163.

[62] Pico, *Disputationes*, 2:378, 380: "Est secundi proprietas super divitiis, quoniam nihil aiunt homini magis proximum; igitur haerens primo secundus locus divitias significabit. Necessaria ratio penes eos, quibus nihil potius est divitiis; verum homini proximiora et intimiora multa, puta dotes animi et corporis, sapientia et valitudo, quare debuerunt potius haec a secundo loco significari, quam a sexto vel a nono, quid quod inter externa quoque parentes, uxor, amici, filii, gloria, pecuniae praeferuntur, ut potiora, ut proximiora, praeterquam apud unum hominum genus, qui se vocant astrologos" (lines 21–28, 1–3).

preferences and values can vary widely, and understanding the individual human being required flexibility, not the rigidity of astrological modes of interpretation. Of course, since the practice of astrology could be lucrative, Pico enjoyed a jab at the astrologers' values while suggesting that such analogies were based on arbitrary judgments.

Pico attacked astrology from every conceivable angle. In fact, he attempted to reduce astrology to an absurdity. But if astrology was so ridiculous, how could it ever have been invented? How could anyone adhere to it? In book 12, the most original part of the work, he attempted a historical reconstruction of the origin and acceptance of astrology. He ascribed its origin to the Chaldeans and claimed that the Egyptians accepted it from them, whereas the Greeks rejected it: "We maintain," he wrote, "that in the matter of primitive natural philosophy which is demonstrated by reason, the Greek philosophers, who reasoned correctly, derived nothing from the Egyptians except religious rites and mathematics."[63] Thus, Pico believed that astrology was incompatible with true religion, which was based on revelation, and with true philosophy, which was based on reason; it could develop only in places where true religion and philosophy had not taken hold. He continued in his attempt to link a system of thought to a particular cultural milieu, and concerning the Chaldeans and Egyptians, he suggested:

> Whoever immerse themselves totally in any school of thought become accustomed quite freely to refer everything to it . . . for this reason, when the ancient Chaldeans continuously devoted themselves to measuring the movement of the heavens and observing the courses of the stars, and as nothing else occupied their minds more, the stars were everything to them, that is, they naturally ascribed everything to the stars; and the same may be said for the Egyptians. . . . Then along with constant habit and a kind of intimacy with the stars, was joined innate curiosity to know the futures of all men, for what we desire could happen, we readily believe possible. Add to these the weakness of the age and the appreciation of divination well entrenched by then in the minds of men. . . . Add also that it marvelously conformed to the idolatry to which they were addicted that the gods whom they worshiped should be accepted by them as authors of all things, not only the good but also the bad. . . . Add the chance for honor and profit, which the astrologers

[63] Ibid., 2:494: ". . . hoc tantum asseveramus naturalis primaevae philosophiae, quae rationibus demonstratur, nihil Graecos philosophos, quicumque recte philosophati sunt, ab Aegyptiis accepisse, sed quae ad caerimonias matemathicamque spectarent" (lines 20–4).

> see as offered to them if from the courses of the sky, which they charted with great pain, albeit perhaps for low pay, they were considered to be able to predict the future.[64]

Garin adduced this attempt to describe the historical development of astrology as an example of the humanist success in regarding human thoughts "as products of a certain culture, as results of certain partial and particular experiences," as opposed to "oracles either of nature or of God, revealed by either Aristotle or Averroës. . . . " Referring specifically to book 12 of the *Disputations*, Garin suggested, "In that book he gave a very precise account of the psychological and historical emergence and diffusion of astrology. As he succeeded in historicising the errors of astrology he succeeded, and with no less acumen, in historicising all human knowledge."[65] Anthony Grafton concurred: "One of the first histories of any art to be written in the Renaissance, Pico's analysis was considerably more original in form, more precise in analysis, and more solid in substance than such better-known predecessors as the polemical histories of art and architecture written by Alberti and Ghiberti."[66] On the other hand, Pico's history of astrology was not as precise and solid as the political histories of Bruni, Machiavelli, or Guicciardini, and his history was polemical, not informative, in intent. For Pico, the very fact that astrology could be located in time and subject to historical development was confirmation of its falsehood: error was historical; truth was eternal.

The concept of the eternity and immutability of truth underlies all of Pico's works. It was the fundamental principle of his *Conclusions*. Only

[64] Ibid., 2:498, 500, 502: "Solent quicumque in aliquam disciplinam se totos ingurgitarunt, omnia ad illam referre quam libentissime . . . hac ratione, cum essent veteres Chaldaeorum in caelestium motibus metiendis et stellarum cursibus observandis iugiter assidui, nec aliud quicquam eorum magis ingenio detinerent, omnia illis erant stellae, hoc est ad stellas libenter omnia referebant, id quod de Aegyptiis dictum pariter intelligatur. . . . tum assidua illis cum stellis consuetudine, quasique familiaritate, quibus omnibus accedebat innata sciendi futura hominibus curiositas. Nam quae fieri posse cupimus, eadem facile possibilia credimus. Accedebat saeculi vitium, et in hominum mentes alte dedita per id tempus persuasio divinandi. . . . Adde quod idolatriae, cui erant obnoxii mire consentiebat, ut quos Deos colebant, eos auctores omnium rerum arbitrarentur, non bonarum modo, sed malarum. . . . Adde gloriae et quaestus occasionem, quam paratam sibi viderunt astronomi, si de cursibus caeli, quos magno labore sed exigua mercede forsitan indagarent, putarentur futura praevideri" (lines 15–16, 27; 1–5; 9–14, 19–22, 25–8).

[65] Eugenio Garin, *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance*, trans. Peter Munz (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 9.

[66] Anthony Grafton, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Trials and Triumphs of an Omnivore," in *Commerce with the Classics: Ancient Books and Renaissance Readers* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 114–15.

in this context can we understand book 1 of the *Disputations* as well as certain assertions throughout, for book 12 brought the *Disputations* in full circle back to its beginning. In book 1, Pico tried to establish that the greatest authorities in religion and philosophy opposed astrology, not to set the terms for debate but to show at the outset that the issue was not and never could be subject to debate. True principles could be discussed, but they were true regardless of the terms of that discussion. The Bible and the Church Fathers handed down the unchanging principles of truth as known through revelation; Plato and Aristotle and the true philosophers handed down the unchanging principles of truth as known through philosophy. Had astrology been true, Ptolemy would have set down its principles, and later practitioners and theoreticians would not have contradicted those principles. For this reason, Pico was anxious to establish discrepancies between Ptolemy and his successors, and he expended considerable effort in elucidating the disputes among astrologers of all periods. This explains why in book 3 he made the incredible claim that astrology was false because astrologers disagreed among themselves: "they argue about the affairs and events themselves."[67]

Grafton was right to point out that Pico used his sources to surmise correctly the rise of "scientific astronomy" in Babylon;[68] nevertheless, Pico's history was vague and imprecise. He alluded to a few matters: the habit of stargazing among the Chaldeans, the presence of cults and mathematics among the Egyptians, and the supposed lack of revelation (i.e., true religion) or a "philosophical" tradition among both. He did not suggest, for example, why the Chaldeans may have been stargazing, nor the advances they made in the science of astronomy as a result; on the other hand, his conception of the development of a habit into a system of thought is interesting and plausible. His suggestion about the incompatibility of certain systems of thought has less merit because he did not admit that these systems could be modified by circumstances and ideas. After all, Greeks and Christians were, in fact, not constrained by their philosophical and religious traditions from accepting astrology despite Pico's assertions to the contrary (excepting those few bad Christians he mentioned). Pico basically posited a theory of the origin of error that owed less to historical awareness and more to Neoplatonist and Augustinian ideas about good and evil. It is as if truth (from philosophy and revelation) was constricted, and in the void error arose. Error thus attached itself to humanity

[67] Pico, *Disputationes*, 1:136: "... res ipsa eventaque refellant" (lines 16–17).
[68] Grafton, *Commerce with the Classics*, 118.

when the spark of the divine was absent. In this way, too, Pico reinforced his contention that his fight against astrology was a form of the Christian fight against idolatry – the eternal, immutable truth against falsehood.

Pico's ultimate test of an idea or a system of thought was the extent to which it confirmed the truth of Christianity. This had been true in all his writings. For example, his interest in Kabbalah was not for its own sake but for the sake of Christianity. Nor was he being disingenuous in his *Apology* when he affirmed that the condemned *Conclusions* were compatible with orthodox Christianity: he truly believed that his study of all schools of thought could only underscore the truth of Christianity. His use of Plato and Aristotle in *On Being and the One* and his use of Kabbalah in *Heptaplus* were carefully and explicitly directed toward Christian ends.

So, too, Pico decried astrology's incompatibility with Christianity. Since he concluded that astrology could not be directed toward Christian ends, it had to be rejected as a dangerous untruth that necessarily skewed the human mind and led away from God. As such, astrology was shown to stand in fundamental opposition to a basic tenet of Pico's thought.

Pico, furthermore, believed that astrology blocked the road to the divine through its fatalism, its interference with the human exercise of free will, for it was only through human will that one could achieve true nearness to the deity. This theme in the *Disputations* also ran throughout Pico's writings. Indeed, his paean to the human mind in book 3 echoed that clarion acclamation of human will in the *Oration*:

> O supreme generosity of God the Father, O highest and most marvelous felicity of man! To him is granted to have whatever he chooses, to be whatever he wills. . . . On man when he came into life the Father conferred the seeds of all kinds and the germs of every way of life. Whatever seeds each man cultivates will grow to maturity and bear in him their one fruit. If they be vegetative, he will be like a plant. If sensitive, he will become brutish. If rational, he will grow into a heavenly being. If intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God. And if, happy in the lot of no created thing, he withdraws into the center of his own unity, his spirit, made one with God, in the solitary darkness of God, who is set above all things, shall surpass them all. Who would not admire this our chameleon?[69]

In the *Disputations*, he also suggested that astrology could block people from their higher, spiritual self: it could prevent them from exercising their free will, for even if astrological predictions were by their nature false, those who accepted them as true would act in accordance with those predictions, perverting their divine gift of choice. He concluded,

[69] Pico, *Oration*, 225.

"There is nothing great on earth but man; there is nothing great in man but his mind and soul. If you rise that high you will reach the sky; if you tend toward the body and gaze toward the sky, you find yourself a fly, or less than a fly."[70] For Pico, humans achieve the higher realms of existence by cultivating their "higher" nature. If they cultivated the stars, they were cultivating a lower nature because, as Pico saw it, the stars represented the corporeal side of creation. While Cassirer overstated the case when he claimed that this was the source of Pico's rejection of astrology,[71] the religious issues of free will and determinism were a continuing theme in Pico's work.

In the *Oration*, Pico had expressed a mystical strain: human highest destiny was to be "made one with God." Union with the deity was the ultimate goal and ultimate joy of human existence. This strain was muted in the *Disputations*, but it appeared in book 3 when he described the role of angels as bringing humans closer to the divine; thus the view that the stars bar human access to the divine was a theme in the *Disputations*. It is interesting that Nahmanides, the thirteenth-century Jewish philosopher and Kabbalist, alluded to this matter in his *Commentary on the Torah*. Nahmanides accepted astrology, and yet he suggested:

> *The Glorious Name* created everything and He placed the power of the lower creatures in the higher beings, giving over each and every nation *in their land, after their nations* some known star or constellation, as is known by means of astrological speculation. . . . But the Land of Israel, which is the middle of the inhabited earth, is the inheritance of the Eternal designated to His Name. He has placed none of the angels as *chief, observer, or ruler* over it since He gave it as a heritage to His people who declare the Unity of His Name, the seed of His beloved ones. . . .[72]

[70] Pico, *Disputationes*, 1:416: ". . . nihil magnum in terra praeter hominem; nihil magnum in homine praeter mentem et animum; huc si ascendis, caelum transcendis; si ad corpus inclinas et caelum suspicis, muscam te vides et musca aliquid minus" (lines 3–6).

[71] Ernst Cassirer, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," in *Renaissance Essays*, ed. Paul O. Kristeller and Philip P. Wiener (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 11–60, at 57; first published in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 3 (1942): 123–44, 319–46. William G. Craven, in *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Symbol of His Age: Modern Interpretations of a Renaissance Philosopher* (Geneva: Droz, 1981), highly criticized Cassirer's view and suggested that the issues of free will and human freedom were really incidental to the work and that this is the only point at which Pico mentions them. Although this is a useful corrective to an overzealous imputation, Craven seemed more bent on disparagement than on a true understanding of Pico and his work. These issues come up throughout the work, and Craven contradicted himself on p. 144 where he discussed book 4 in the *Disputations* and wrote about Pico's examples of how the astrologers "subject the mind to the heavens even where it does not depend on the body."

[72] Ramban Nahmanides, *Commentary on the Torah*, trans. and ed. C. B. Chavel (New York: Shilo Publishing, 1974), 3:268–9.

The divine freed Israel from the dominion of the stars so that they could be his people, under his direct rule. This closed the gap between the human and the divine, making the divine more accessible to the human. This was important for the mystic who sought the immediacy of the divine presence.

Pico was aware of Nahmanides as a Kabbalist. He mentioned him as a commentator on the Bible in the proem to *Heptaplus*[73] and, according to Kibre, owned parts of his *Commentary on the Torah*.[74] On the other hand, Pico need not have been aware of Nahmanides's claims on this point, for this passage in Nahmanides illustrates well how mysticism could affect a philosopher's view of astrology. The rational philosopher seeks to understand the divine; the mystical philosopher seeks to experience it. Consequently, a mystical philosopher could perceive that astrology presented an obstacle to direct union with the divine, for the sky became an intermediary that must be overcome. Pico may have been struck by this when he was pursuing his mystical studies.

But Pico made no direct references to Kabbalah in the *Disputations*. He did note that "just as the astrologers contend that they find their images in the stars, so the Hebrew masters contend that they find their alefbeth, that is, the letters and elements of their language, in the stars."[75] This probably referred to the Kabbalists, but the attack was against their recourse to the stars, not Kabbalistic study itself. His attack could also suggest that in their recourse to the stars, such Kabbalists perverted their doctrines. He attacked an idea of the Kabbalist Eleazar of Worms, that different signs of the zodiac had power over different parts of the human body,[76] but this, too, was a condemnation of a specific astrological idea of a specific individual, not of Kabbalah. Had Pico rejected Kabbalah by the time he wrote the *Disputations*? Had it ceased to exert an influence on him? Pico did not directly attack Kabbalah even though it fostered astrology. Instead, among Jewish thinkers, he focused his ire against Abraham ibn Ezra, who was not a Kabbalist. Had Pico set aside his Kabbalistic studies by the time he wrote the *Disputations* but was not ready to repudiate Kabbalah? Not only did Pico not mention Kabbalah in the

[73] Pico, *Heptaplus*, 73.

[74] Pearl Kibre, *The Library of Pico della Mirandola* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936; repr., New York: AMS Press, 1966), 41.

[75] Pico, *Disputationes*, 2:268: "Hebraeorum Magistri, sicuti imagines suas astrologi, ita suum in stellis alephetarium, hoc est suae linguae notas et elementa, invenire contendunt . . . " (lines 22–4).

[76] Ibid., 10:420.

Disputations, he did not cite any Jewish thinkers who supported his position. The absence of any mention of Maimonides is astonishing. Pico knew his work; he had cited him in the *Conclusions* and the *Heptaplus*.[77] Pico believed that Maimonides was a Kabbalist. In the *Conclusions*, he wrote, " . . . Rabbi Moses the Egyptian, in the book the Latins call the *Guide for the Perplexed*, while in the superficial shell of words appears to move with the philosophers, in hidden insights of a profound sense enfolds the mysteries of the Cabala."[78] Maimonides was also a fervent critic of astrology.[79] This lack of reference to Maimonides in the *Disputations* may indicate either that Pico had rejected Kabbalah regardless of the position of the Kabbalist on astrology or that Pico had become loath to write about any medieval Jewish thinker in a positive light but perhaps still accepted Kabbalah. Or it may support Farmer's claim that the editors of the *Disputations* tampered seriously with the work.[80]

What made Pico change his attitude toward astrology? Again, we lack the sources and must speculate. As we noted regarding *Heptaplus*, he had already perceived a possible conflict between religion and astrology and strongly condemned judicial astrology, although he accepted a general astrological cosmos as well as dogma that he later rejected. Pico may have studied astrology, but he had not enrolled in those curricula in which astrology formed an essential role – mathematics and medicine. He never did astrology. Thus, he did not have the personal experience with astrology that fostered continuing acceptance, unlike Ficino, for example, who had had training in medicine.[81]

[77] *Conclusions*, Three Maimonidean theses, 277; Kabbalistic thesis 63, 547; *Heptaplus*, 73, 121.

[78] Kabbalistic thesis 63, 547. See also Wirszubski, chap. 7.

[79] See, e.g., Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 543. Alexander Marx, "The Correspondence between the Rabbis of Southern France and Maimonides about Astrology," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 3 (1926): 311–58, contains an edition of Maimonides's letter to the rabbis in Hebrew in which he uncategorically condemned astrology (349–58). Of course, the latter was not available to Pico.

[80] See n. 36 above.

[81] More than a century later, Johannes Kepler reported that he could not totally give up on astrology because of his successful experiences with it. See Johannes Kepler, *De stella nova*, vol. 1 of *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Max Caspar (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1937–), 186: "Non nego Pico, magnam esse vanitatem experientiae ab Astrologis jactatae, etiam circa hoc caput; at non ideo concedo, nullam fuisse experientiam" (I will not deny, with Pico, that there is great vanity of experience vaunted by astrologers, even about this chapter, but I will not on that account concede that experience has been nothing) (lines 21–3).

Perhaps he was persuaded by the Dominican preacher Girolamo Savonarola to push his attack further than he had in his earlier works, as was first alleged by Lucas Bellanti in his defense of astrology written in 1497, the year after Pico's *Disputations* was published.[82] Pico was instrumental in bringing the friar to Florence and had frequent discussions with him. The friar's rhetoric was very powerful. Even Ficino, who was not as taken by Savonarola as his friend and supported some level of astrology throughout his life, may have been affected by the friar's preaching on the subject, because at this point he made his strongest arguments against astrology.[83] But lacking Ficino's solid foundation in astrological practice and never having shown a particularly deep commitment to astrology, Pico could have been persuaded by Savonarola to give up his limited belief in astrology altogether, whereas Pico maintained other, more deeply held ideas, like his commitment to pagan philosophy, in opposition to Savonarola.

Pico's use of Kabbalah in the *Conclusions* had sparked an immediate positive response. Within a decade after the publication of the *Conclusions*, the German humanist Johann Reuchlin (1455–1522) had adopted and expanded Pico's combination of Kabbalah and magic in natural philosophy.[84] In addition, much later the English humanist and natural philosopher John Dee (1527–1608/9) applied Kabbalistic techniques directly to the study of nature,[85] and Giordano Bruno (1548–1600) used Kabbalah in his philosophy, although he did not study it directly but absorbed it

[82] Bellanti alleged this in *Responsiones in disputationes Joannis Pici Mirandulae comitis adversus astrologos* (Basil, 1554), 1:169–70. For modern accounts of the relationship between Pico and Savonarola on this point, see Eugenio Garin's introduction to his edition of the *Disputations*, 1:1–6; Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 212–16; and Steven vanden Broecke, *The Limits of Influence: Pico, Louvain, and the Crisis of Astrology* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 78–80.

[83] See Carol Kaske, "Ficino's Shifting Attitude towards Astrology in *De vita coelitus comparanda*, the Letter to Poliziano, and the *Apologia* to the Cardinals," in *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone: Studi e documenti*, ed. Gian Carolo Garfagnini (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1986), 371–81. I thank Professor Kaske for sending me a copy of her article.

[84] Charles Zika, *Reuchlin und die okkulte Tradition der Renaissance* (Sigmaringen, Germany: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 1998). See pp. 172–6 for a comparison of Reuchlin and Pico.

[85] Nicholas H. Clulee, *John Dee's Natural Philosophy: Between Science and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1988), 86–96; Deborah E. Harkness, *John Dee's Conversations with Angels: Cabala, Alchemy, and the End of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 181–94. György E. Szönyi, *John Dee's Occultism: Magical Exaltation through Powerful Signs* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), discusses Dee's relationship with Pico and Kabbalah (90–104 et passim).

through the writings of Pico, Reuchlin, and others.[86] In general, the use of Kabbalah filtered widely into the literature of the Renaissance period.[87]

The initial response to Pico's *Disputations* among natural philosophers was very different from the reaction to his Christian Kabbalah: it sparked a widespread negative reaction. Among supporters of astrology, the scathing attack by Bellanti was the first and typical.[88] Early positive reactions were principally among those with a religious motivation, such as Savonarola, who wrote an Italian summary of Pico's arguments. Although Pico's attack on astrology may not have had the immediate broad appeal of his Kabbalah, it would be wrong to dismiss the *Disputations* as "more often cited than read."[89]

It would also be wrong to assume that if Pico's *Disputations* had found widespread acceptance, the cause of astronomy in the Renaissance would have been greatly advanced.[90] Indeed, the study of astronomy was at that point perhaps inextricably bound up with astrology, and astronomy could have been harmed if the pursuit of astrology did not continue. Pico's claim, for example, that "the determination of location is not everywhere exact at any rate simply because of a deficient instrument, for whatever the size of a mechanical instrument, it cannot suffice [to make] those actual divisions to be perceptible to the senses, which are necessary to avoid error"[91] must give one pause; he did not leave room for improvements, and the attempts of astrologers like Tycho Brahe to get more accurate readings enabled significant advances in astronomy. Nevertheless,

[86] Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 257–74. See also Karen Silvia de León-Jones, *Giordano Bruno and the Kabbalah: Prophets, Magicians, and Rabbis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004). Arielle Saiber, *Giordano Bruno and the Geometry of Language* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2005), also has a brief discussion of Kabbalah (56–8).

[87] Philip Beitchman's *Alchemy of the Word: Cabala of the Renaissance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) is a poor introduction to Kabbalah in the Renaissance, but chap. 3 is a useful annotated bibliography of writings on or using Kabbalah, though, surprisingly, it leaves out Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.

[88] For a discussion of this reaction, see Thorndike, *A History of Magic*, 540–43, and Shumaker, *The Occult Sciences*, 27–41.

[89] Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, 154, translated this comment from Benedetto Soldati, *La poesia astrologica nel Quattrocento: Richerche e studi* (Florence: Sansoni, 1906), 216.

[90] Tester made a thinker's rejection of astrology the test of progressive thinking in science in his *History of Western Astrology*, chap. 6.

[91] Pico, *Disputationes* 2:320, 322: "... loci deprehensio fidelis usquequaeque non est, organo simpliciter utique deficiente; neque enim potest qualiscumque vastitas instrumenti mechanici satis esse divisionibus actu sensuque perceptibilibus, quae sunt errori vitando necessariae...."

the *Disputations* did play a role in the astronomical discoveries of the time. Vanden Broecke has shown that the influence of the *Disputations* among natural philosophers in Louvain started in the sixteenth century.[92] Westman has suggested that Pico's derision of the inability of astrologers to fix the order of the planets was a source for Copernicus's rejection of the Ptolemaic system.[93] Johannes Kepler, though an astrologer, wrote approvingly on Pico's arguments in the *Disputations* in two of his works, *On the New Star* and *Harmony of the World*.[94]

Both as promoter of magic and astrology and as critic of magic and astrology, Pico had a strong effect on Renaissance natural philosophy. Kabbalah became an integral part of the study of nature through his *Conclusions* and other earlier writings, while facets of his condemnation of astrology in the *Disputations* were adopted by astronomers, including leaders in the new cosmology.

[92] *The Limits of Influence*, chaps. 4–8. I do not agree with vanden Broecke that "the work's primary objective was to attack a new genre of popular prognostications" (2), but he argues persuasively that it was seen that way by Louvain philosophers who cited it.

[93] Robert S. Westman, "Copernicus and the Prognosticators: The Bologna Period, 1496–1500," *Universitas* 5 (1993): 1–5. I thank Professor Westman for providing me with a copy of this article.

[94] *De stella nova*, 181–94; *Harmonices mundi*, vol. 6 of *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Max Caspar (Munich: Beck, 1940), 264–86. Most commentators have suggested that his study of Pico's *Disputations* caused Kepler to reform his astrology. This view started with Ernst Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit*, 4 vols. (Berlin: B. Cassirer, 1906), 1:148–9, 151–2, and has continued to be cited. However, Kepler reformed his astrology at the time that he disparaged Pico's work. I have suggested that Kepler was more impressed with the role the critique of astrology played in encouraging the belief in a physical universe. See my "Two Renaissance Views of Astrology: Pico and Kepler" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1987), chap. 4, and my "Kepler's Attitude toward Pico and the Anti-Astrology Polemic." Louis Valcke, "Jean Pic de la Mirandole et Johannes Kepler: De la mathématique à la physique," *Rinascimento*, 2nd ser., 34 (1996): 275–96, and Robert S. Westman, "Kepler's Early Physical-Astrological Problematic," *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 32 (2001): 227–36, have followed me in this.

8

Pico's Quest for All Knowledge

Carl N. Still

Like so much of Pico's thought, his treatment of knowledge has been marked by divergences of interpretation that seem to divide him against himself.[1] On the one hand, there is a minimizing account of Pico on knowledge: as shaped by medieval scholasticism, Pico is ultimately a realist for whom there is no critical problem that requires a distinct "theory of knowledge" to resolve. Indeed, epistemological doctrines are not central to Pico's thought and instead play a secondary role compared to issues bearing on the will and love.[2] On the other hand, there is a maximizing account, according to which Pico makes a momentous contribution by conceiving of all knowledge in symbolic terms and anticipating the

[1] General accounts of Pico on knowledge can be found in S. A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486): The Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems* (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998), 102–5; Fernand Roulier, *Jean Pic de la Mirandole (1463–1494): Humaniste, Philosophe, et Théologien* (Geneva: Editions Slatkine, 1989), 376–420; and Avery Dulles, *Princeps Concordiae: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and the Scholastic Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941), 129–43. More specialized studies are cited by topic below. For texts and translations of Pico's works, I have used the following: G. Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno, e Scritti vari*, ed. Eugenio Garin (Florence: Vallecchi, 1942); *Commentary on a Canzone of Benivieni*, trans. Sears Jayne (New York: Peter Lang, 1984); and *On the Dignity of Man, On Being and the One*, and *Heptaplus*, trans. Charles Glenn Wallis, Paul J. W. Miller, and Douglas Carmichael (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998). All citations of the *Conclusions* below are from the Farmer's edition and translation in his *Syncretism in the West*, and references follow his numbering system.

[2] This is the position forcefully presented in Dulles, *Princeps Concordiae*, esp. chap. 7. Ernst Cassirer questioned the consistency of Dulles's argument for Pico's realism in "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: A Study in the History of Renaissance Ideas," reprinted in *Renaissance Essays*, ed. Paul O. Kristeller and Philip P. Wiener (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 11–60, at 11; yet he agreed with Dulles that Pico "stands entirely within scholasticism" (59).

course of modern thought.[3] Both of these accounts as classically presented run afoul of the more recent tendency to resist interpretations of the multifarious Pico by resolving his thought into a single organizing principle – unless it be his own theme of showing the harmony of Plato and Aristotle.[4] Perhaps the best way to capture Pico's account of knowledge with the least distortion is to return to its elements, beginning with his treatment of human cognitive powers and examining the cognitive process as it ascends through sensory, rational, intellectual, and divine forms of knowing. By reference to this model of cognition, familiar from the medieval scholastics, Pico's reliance on it as well as his divergence from it will emerge more clearly. We may finally consider to what extent Pico offers a coherent account of mind and knowledge.

It is noteworthy that Avery Dulles based his account of Pico's epistemology on the explicitly scholastic *Conclusions* and not on the highly rhetorical *Oration*, which he regarded as one of the least important works for Pico's epistemology.[5] Things appear otherwise when the *Oration*, which introduces the *Conclusions*, is made the centerpiece of Pico's thought. The relation of knowledge to being in Pico's *Oration* may be considered in the

[3] See Cassirer, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," 11–60. Cassirer adds, "Were we forced to deny to Pico's thought any such 'inner form', it would then remain but a mere literary curiosity. . . . But Pico's thought would have to be expunged from the history of genuine *philosophy*" (17). The suggestion of an "inner form" in Pico's thought is borrowed from Eugenio Garin, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Vita e dottrina* (Florence: Felice le Monnier, 1937). The distinction between Dulles's minimizing and Cassirer's maximizing accounts is remarked by Harry Caplan in his review of Dulles's *Princeps Concordiae* in *The Philosophical Review* 53 (1944): 558–9.

[4] Pico announces this theme in the *Oration* and in the first of the 900 theses according to his own opinion: "There is no natural or divine question in which Aristotle and Plato do not agree in meaning and substance, although in their words they seem to disagree" (1>1) (*Conclusions*, 365). For a sustained argument against any single framework of interpretation for Pico, see William G. Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Symbol of His Age: Modern Interpretations of a Renaissance Philosopher* (Geneva: Libraire Droz, 1981).

[5] Dulles, *Princeps Concordiae*, 131. Unlike the highly polished rhetorical character of the *Oration*, Pico employs the language and style of scholasticism in the 900 theses set out in his *Conclusions* (1486). Prefaced by the *Oration*, the *Conclusions* is divided into approximately 400 historical theses drawn from major philosophers of the Latin, Arabic, Peripatetic, and Platonic "nations" in addition to the "most ancient" nations (Pythagorean, Chaldean, Hermetic, and Cabalistic), followed by almost 500 theses according to his own opinion. S. A. Farmer provides charts outlining all the theses in *Syncretism in the West* (204–7). It is tempting, but dubious, to take all of the historical theses to represent Pico's own view. On interpreting the historical theses, Farmer asserts that "[t]o reconstruct Pico's views in this part of the text, all topically related theses must be collated with the last 500 theses, given 'according to his own opinion'" (204). Many scholars, including Dulles and Cassirer, rely inappropriately on historical theses alone to furnish Pico's own opinions.

following terms: if the human being is a creature capable of actualizing every archetype within its being, does it follow for Pico that human beings are capable of attaining every kind of knowledge? If Pico is approached from the vantage point of his medieval predecessors, one might hold with the scholastics that there are intrinsic limits on human knowledge rooted in human nature itself, particularly the dependence of all intellectual cognition on sensory perception. As Aristotle said, with far-reaching effects, "the soul never thinks *without an image*."[6] For Aquinas, this had meant that there could be no direct cognition or "vision" of God or any spiritual being by a human knower while still in this life, which is to say by virtue of natural human powers.[7] Consequently, all realities whose level of being exceed that of the human being have to be translated into the mode of human knowing. Human beings, then, unable ever to become purely spiritual intelligences, can only approximate the angelic mode of knowing in rare moments of immediate intellectual intuition, as when grasping first principles or intuiting the essence of a perceived object. Yet if Pico's human being is the creature that has no fixed nature, one might expect that Pico stands the scholastic paradigm on its head: where there is no determinate nature, there can be no natural limits. Is this what Pico had in mind when he spoke of "a perfect knowledge of everything knowable"?[8] In what follows, we shall investigate the steps that lead to this loftiest goal for human beings, whether they can traverse them or not.

I. Cognitive Powers

Faithful to its scholastic roots, Pico's account of the soul and its powers forms the basis of his account of cognitive functioning. In addition to the body, the human being has a soul consisting of four "parts" – the

[6] *De anima* 3.7 431a 16–17, trans. J. A Smith, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Bollingen, 1984), 1:685.

[7] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I q. 12, a. 4, corp. Pico calls Thomas "the glory of our theology" (*Heptaplus* 2, proem [trans. Carmichael, 95]), but he does not consistently follow Aquinas and sometimes makes him a target of criticism. For varying accounts of Pico's relationship to Aquinas, in addition to Dulles, see Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Thomism and the Italian Thought of the Renaissance," in *Medieval Aspects of Renaissance Learning: Three Essays*, ed. and trans. Edward P. Mahoney (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1974), 71–3, and Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 47–9 and the notes on 218–31.

[8] *Conclusions* 3>40 (Farmer, 410–11). This passage refers specifically to acquiring complete knowledge through intelligibles above us without relying on inquiry, but by instead following "a purgatorial path" (*per uiam purgatoriam*). Pico asserts that this position is common to Platonists as well as Aristotelians, though it is "less apparent" in the latter.

vegetative, the sensitive, the rational, and the intellectual.[9] While the vegetative part has purely vital functions of nourishing and sustaining the body, the other three powers represent an ascending order of intellectual power. Strictly speaking, the differentiation of the *intellectual* from the *rational* as distinct powers of soul is anomalous in scholastic terms, since, as Pico notes in his early *Commento*, "Latin Aristotelians" take the rational part "to be the highest and noblest part of our soul."[10] While the Latin scholastics recognized that the rational soul contained within it the power of purely intellectual thought associated with the angels,[11] Pico follows the Platonists, for whom there is an "intellectual and angelic part" of the human soul above the rational soul.[12] This appeal to intellect and reason as distinct parts of the soul and not merely powers of the same part serves Pico's purpose of sewing together Platonic and Aristotelian accounts of the soul while also illustrating the distinction of levels in the human being, from the bestial (corresponding to sense) to the human (reason) to the angelic (intellect).[13] The inclusion of a power in the soul above the human level per se also sets the stage for the cognitive ascent featured in Pico's celebrated *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, to which we shall return below.

Now, from every sort of cognition there follows some sort of desire, whether it is mere appetite at the sensory level, choice at the rational

[9] *Commento* I.12. The *Commento* was written in 1486 as a commentary on Benivieni's poem about love and a response to Marsilio Ficino's *De amore*.

[10] *Commento* I.12 (trans. Jayne, 91).

[11] Among the scholastics, purely intellectual cognition (*intellectus*) was typically distinguished from discursive reasoning (*ratio*) as, respectively, the power of knowing immediately and the power of reasoning toward a grasp of truth. The distinction is importantly formulated in Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy* 4.6, and nicely illustrated in Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I q. 79, a. 8, corp.: "[R]easoning is related to intellection as moving is related to resting, or acquiring to having – one of these is complete, the other incomplete. And because motion always advances from something immovable and stops at some resting point, so it is that human reasoning, in the course of investigation and discovery, advances from certain things that are grasped directly by intellect. . . ." (*Thomas Aquinas: The Treatise on Human Nature*: Summa theologiae *1a 75–89*, trans. Robert Pasnau [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2002], 94–5). Unlike Pico, however, Aquinas explicitly denies that reason and intellect are different *powers* in the human soul.

[12] *Commento* I.12 (trans. Jayne, 91–2). The most proximate Platonic source is Plotinus *Enneads* IV.2.2; see also Ficino *De amore* VI.13. While Pico would not regard the soul as literally divided into parts, he is suggesting that angelic cognition – immediate knowing without reasoning – lies within the natural capacity of the human mind.

[13] In *Commento* II.7, the cognitive faculties are divided simply into sensation, reason, and intellect. In subsequent works, he employs the distinctions between external and internal sense powers, between different functions of reason, and between the agent and potential intellects.

level, or will at the threshold of intellect. Already in the *Commento*, Pico adumbrates the theme of the rational power reaching upward in the direction of intellect, or downward toward the objects of the senses, by virtue of its choice:

> The rational faculty, located between sensation and intellect, as a mean between extremes, can address itself to the desires of either one, according to its own choice, now inclining to one, that is, downward toward sensation, now rising to the other, that is upward toward intellect.[14]

As poised between the senses and intellect, reason apparently has no resting place in its own right but is continually pulled up to the angelic level or, more frequently, down to the bestial level.[15] As a central exhortation of the philosophical life is for the human creature to climb to the heights of its intellectual capacities, understanding the relationship of reason to intellect is crucial to the fulfillment of that imperative.

On this theme, Pico appeals to the Platonic analogy of sight to intellectual vision and at the same time employs Aristotle's dictum that intellect is related to soul as sight is to the body.[16] Yet where we readily rely on sight, which takes the lead in our perception of corporeal objects, the power of pure intellectual vision is difficult of access and unknown by the majority.[17] Pico accounts for this disanalogy by appealing to the Platonic claim that our souls are so ensconced in their bodies that, unlike heavenly souls, they cannot use both their sensible and intellectual vision at the same time. Where souls in a more perfect state have two faces like Janus and two sets of eyes, our souls have been reduced to one face, sighted on one side but not on the other.

> [T]he body-dominated souls, which are less perfect, have eyes on only one side; thus if they turn the side on which they have eyes toward the body, it is the other side, which has no eyes, which will be turned toward the intellect,

[14] *Commento* II.7 (trans. Jayne, 101).

[15] Strictly speaking, there is also rational desire, which is characteristically human, but since the human being includes the higher and lower levels of cognition and desire, there is a perpetual contest in us between desire for sensible and spiritual objects. In choosing one or the other, reason is either tending below or above itself. See *Commento* II.7; see also III.1: "[J]ust as the first love, which is in the Angelic Mind, is called angelic or divine, so the second love, which is in the Rational Soul, is called human love, because the rational faculty is the most important part of man's nature" (trans. Jayne, 122).

[16] *Commento* II. 9; Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.12 1144a29–30.

[17] Pico indicates that the majority of human beings do not rise above the level of abstraction from the senses in *Commento* III.2. This section is particularly rich in its treatment of different levels of the human creature and its states of knowledge.

> and thus such souls are prevented from seeing the intelligibles. By the same token, if they turn their eyes toward the intellect, they can no longer look after the body, and have to give up caring for it.[18]

Thus, Pico intensifies the familiar existential predicament of the struggle between an intellectual focus on unseen realities and attentiveness to one's surroundings by suggesting their mutual exclusion. He likewise notes that those gifted with a vision of transcendent beauty (e.g., Tiresias, Homer, St. Paul) also suffered corporeal blindness as a consequence.[19] So while the intellect is present as a distinct power and part of the human soul, its activation apparently depends on a disengagement with the senses so extreme that it is not even attempted by most and cannot be sustained for long even by the few.

These themes are easily recognizable from Plato and the tradition that follows him, which provides the context for the early *Commento*.[20] How then does the exposition of human intellectual capacity in the Platonic context compare with a similar exercise in biblical commentary in Pico's later *Heptaplus*? In the course of his allegorized interpretation of Genesis 1 there, Pico lays out a similar yet slightly more nuanced schema of human nature, featuring five parts: (1) the rational soul; (2) the mortal body; (3) an "intervening spirit," which serves as a "connecting link" between soul and body; (4) an intermediate sensual part that is shared with nonrational animals; and (5) an intelligence that is shared with the angels.[21] The five external sense powers are said to flow like rivers into the sea which is the Aristotelian common sense (*sensus communis*) – the internal sense power

[18] *Commento* III.4 (trans. Jayne, 126). As Jayne indicates (216 n. 43), the whole passage seems to build upon Aristophanes's fable of the divided androgynes in *Symposium* 189D–93D, who search for their missing half in order to complete themselves – except that seeing plays no significant role in the Platonic fable.

[19] *Commento* III.4. Paul's vision is also mentioned in the *Oration* (trans. Wallis, 8–9) in connection with the imitation of the cherubim, which is discussed below.

[20] Pico devotes *Commento* II.14–22 (trans. Jayne, 107–20) to an extensive interpretation of Plato's *Symposium* 203B–C (the birth of love from the union of Plenty and Poverty) in terms of the growth of the Platonic Ideas in the Angelic Mind from an inchoate state (*chaos*) to a perfected one by means of love. I shall not attempt to expound the account fully here, though it contains much of interest for Pico's theory of knowledge and provides a glimpse of what his intended commentary on the *Symposium* might have looked like.

[21] *Heptaplus* 4.1 and 4.2 (trans. Carmichael, 118–21). The only material difference between this account of human cognitive powers in the *Heptaplus* and that in the *Commento* seems to be that the vegetative, or nutritive, soul has been replaced by the "intervening spirit." For a detailed exposition of *Heptaplus* 4 as a whole, see Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, 2 vols. (London: Constable, 1970), 2:505–26.

that coordinates and unifies the data from the external senses. Likewise, "from this sea the five senses of the visible body – hearing, sight, taste, touch, and smell – spread out like five Mediterranean seas to penetrate the continent of the body."[22] The common sense is here regarded as the "perfection of the sensitive powers," though in the *Conclusions* Pico undermines the distinctness of the common sense from the external sense powers.[23]

After positing the power of reason as the "heaven" which God creates in Genesis 1, Pico then treats the "waters above the heavens" as belonging to a higher intellectual order which illuminates the human mind. He is less definite, though, about what this higher intellect is: "[a] greater, even divine, intellect illuminates the intellect in us, whether it be God (as some would have it) or a mind more nearly related to man's, as almost all the Greeks and Arabs and many of the Hebrews hold."[24]

Following the medieval Arabic philosopher Alfarabi, Pico will call this higher intellect the "Spirit of the Lord," but he stops short of identifying it as the "sun" of the Genesis creation story and the agent intellect of Aristotelian psychology. Instead, he follows a more Platonic route in suggesting that the rational soul can be illumined or dimmed, depending on its relation to the higher intellect or lower sense powers: "wherever the soul turns toward the waters above, toward the Spirit of the Lord, it shall

[22] *Heptaplus* 4.3 (ed. Garin, 276; trans. Carmichael, 121): "... ab eo mari quinque corporis sensus quod videmus: auditum, visum, gustum, tactum, olfactum, quasi quinque maria mediterranea diffusos intrare corporis continentem. ... " Pico makes reference here to Plato *Theaetetus* 156Aff.

[23] *Conclusions* 2>30 (ed. and trans. Farmer, 380–1): "Common sense is not distinct from the sense of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch." See also 2>58, which appeals to the authority of Aristotle and Plato to confirm that the common sense power does not differ "in subject" from the exterior sense powers.

[24] *Heptaplus* 4.2 (ed. Garin, 274, 276; trans. Carmichael, 120–1): "Intellectum enim, qui est in nobis, illustrat maior atque adeo divinus intellectus sive sit Deus (ut quidam volunt), sive proxima homini et cognata mens, ut fere omnes Graeci, ut Arabes, ut Hebraeorum plurimi volunt." The latter (*mens*) alludes to the agent intellect introduced in an opaque passage in Aristotle's *De anima* 3.5 and is taken by many commentators to be a cosmic power separate from matter and outside the human soul. This position, known as the unicity of the intellect, is associated especially with Averroës. It provoked major controversy in the Latin West beginning in the thirteenth century and was cited in the Parisian condemnations of 1277 (e.g., article 117 in the "Condemnation of 219 Propositions," translated by E. L. Fortin and P. D. O'Neill and reprinted in *Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh, 2nd ed. [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1984], 589). The unicity issue was still very much a part of the milieu at Padua when Pico began his studies in scholastic philosophy there (1480–2), before moving on to Paris (1485–6). I return to Pico's handling of this thorny problem below.

be called sun, because it becomes bright all over; wherever it looks at the lower waters, the sensual potentialities from which it contracts some stain of corruption, it shall have the name of moon.[25]

The present life requires that the soul turn primarily to the sense powers, with the result that our typical epistemic condition is belief rather than knowledge. In this relative darkness, the soul relies on the "powers of combining and dividing, of reasoning and defining," which are rather like stars enhancing the light of the moon.[26] Once the soul is freed from the body, however, it will contemplate divine things in the pure light of the sun, and there shall be no more night.

In the more familiar *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, Pico strikingly illustrates the soul's powers in terms of their tendencies to transform human nature into infrahuman or suprahuman modalities. Thus he writes:

> [I]f you see a man given over to his belly and crawling upon the ground, it is a bush not a man that you see. If you see anyone blinded by the illusions of his empty and Calypso-like *imagination*, seized by the desire of scratching, and delivered over to the *senses*, it is a brute not a man that you see. If you come upon a philosopher winnowing out all things by right *reason*, he is a heavenly not an earthly animal. If you come upon a pure *contemplator*, ignorant of the body, banished to the innermost places of the mind, he is not an earthly, not a heavenly, animal; he more superbly is a divinity clothed with human flesh.[27]

Here the various powers are correlated with distinct states of being, all of which are present in the human being. Those ruled by their appetites are plantlike, hardly rising above the operation of the nutritive power. The sense-dominated creature is an irrational animal, while the one led by reason is more heavenly than earthly. As in the *Commento*, there is no definite threshold proper to the human being as a rational animal

[25] *Heptaplus* 4.4 (ed. Garin, 278; trans. Carmichael, 122): "... ut qua parte ad aquas superiores, ad Domini Spiritum animus vergit, propterea quod totus lucet, sol nuncupetur; qua vero aquas inferiores, idest sensuales potentias respicit, unde infectionis aliquam contrahit maculam, lunae habeat appellationem."

[26] *Heptaplus* 4.4 (ed. Garin, 280; trans. Carmichael, 123).

[27] *Oratio* (ed. Garin, 108; trans. Wallis, 6): "Si quem enim videris deditum ventri, humi serpentem hominem, frutex est, non homo, quem vides; si quem in fantasiae quasi Calypsus vanis praestigiis caecutientem et subscalpenti delinitum illecebra sensibus mancipatum, brutum est, non homo, quem vides. Si recta philosophum ratione omnia discernentem, hunc venereris; caeleste est animal, non terrenum. Si purum contemplatorem corporis nescium, in penetralia mentis relegatum, hic non terrenum, non caeleste animal; hic augustius est numen humana carne circumvestitum." Italics have been added to the translation for emphasis.

at home in its mortal frame. Nor is there any completion of the noetic process until reason gives way to contemplation.

The distinction of intellect from reason as powers and not merely activities of the intellectual soul naturally raises the question of the relation between the two. Where the scholastics had largely thought that the rational soul was subsistent and separable from the mortal body, does Pico hold that only of intellect? And what is the relation of the human intellect to the higher intellect mentioned in the *Heptaplus*? Against the grain of scholastic theologians like Aquinas as well as contemporary Florentine Platonists like Ficino, Pico apparently entertained the Averroistic doctrine of the unicity of intellect – that there is only one intellect for all human beings, and it is separate from all individuals. In his 900 theses, he cites from Averroës the notorious thesis that "the intellective soul is one in all men."[28] Unlike Averroës, Pico maintained that unicity of intellect was compatible with personal immortality, as when he proposed that "it is possible, upholding the unity of the intellect, that my soul, so particularly mine that it is not shared by me with all, remains after death."[29] A closer inspection of the theses shows that Pico speaks both ways about the rational soul being immortal or not, without providing any cogent reconciliation of these two contrary positions. The nearest account of their compatibility appears to be in Pico's conclusions introducing new doctrines, one of which compares the rational soul to intellectual nature as part to whole: "The intellectual nature that exists in the rational soul over [and above] the rational nature differs from the pure intellectual nature precisely as the part differs from the whole."[30] Yet if the intellectual part of an individual soul is to be fused with the whole separate intellect in beatitude, it remains very unclear in what sense a particular rational soul can be immortal.[31] If, moreover, the intellectual power of

[28] *Conclusions* 7.2 (ed. and trans. Farmer, 252–3): "Vna est anima intellectiua in omnibus hominibus." See *Conclusions* 3>67–9.

[29] *Conclusions* 7.4 (ed. and trans. Farmer, 252–3): "Possibile est tenendo unitatem intellectus, animam meam ita particulariter meam, ut non sit mihi communis, cum omnibus remanere post mortem." See the discussion in Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 112–14, which points out that this conclusion, attributed to Averroës, overstates his position considerably (113).

[30] *Conclusions* 3>64 (ed. and trans. Farmer, 419): "Intellectualis natura, quae est in anima rationali supra naturam rationalem, praecise differt a natura intellectuali pura sicut differt pars a toto."

[31] Dulles ultimately rejects Pico's doctrine of the intellect as incoherent: "His theory of intellect is one of his many rather exasperating attempts to combine irreconcilable elements in his philosophy" (*Princeps Concordiae*, 143).

the soul is to be reabsorbed into the higher power of the divine intellect, it will surely be immortal, but it will not belong to anyone in particular. Pico's promise to reconcile Averroism, which lets personal immortality go, and Christianity, which holds on to it, remains unfulfilled, since the universal intellect of the former cannot be reconciled with the personal soul of the latter.

II. Cognitive Process

Just as Pico's account of the soul's powers is largely based on the Aristotelian and scholastic models of the rational soul, so too Pico's account of cognition presumes the panoply of cognitive powers featured in that tradition, ranging from the external senses to the internal senses[32] and the potential and agent intellects. Likewise, it employs a theory of abstraction derived from Aristotle and refined by the Arabic commentators and Latin scholastics. In broad outline, this abstractive process is supposed to work as follows: all cognition begins with an impression of an object on the external senses, in which the species of the object is conveyed. The internal sense powers then unify this sensory information into a likeness of the object, known as a phantasm.[33] By the illumining power of the agent intellect, an intelligible species will be abstracted from the phantasm and impressed upon the potential intellect. At this point, the object will be grasped in its universal nature, fully abstracted from the individuating features of the object. Yet in order for the object to be known as the individual it is, the intellect has to revert to the phantasm which corresponds to the original object. By Pico's time, the details of almost every stage of this cognitive process had been debated, which left him relatively free to select from among various alternatives.

[32] The internal sense powers include the common sense power, imagination, memory, and estimation. The first three are identified and discussed in Aristotle's psychological treatises *De anima* and *De memoria et reminiscentia*, while the fourth is developed by Avicenna and transmitted through the medieval Latin tradition.

[33] In *Conclusions* 2.39 (ed. and trans. Farmer, 230–1), Pico offers a definition of the phantasm from Aquinas: "A phantasm is a secondary and instrumental agent in the production of an intelligible image [*in productione speciei*]." Farmer translates *species* as "image" on the grounds that the link between intelligible species and species in the logical and metaphysical senses relied on by the medieval philosophers was weakened by Pico (*Syncretism in the West*, 100 n. 5). On the other hand, the disadvantage of "image" as a translation arises from the fact that while the intelligible species is a likeness, it is completely abstract and universalized and thus quite distinct from images in the usual sense, which belong to the sensory powers.

We may begin where the Aristotelian perspective does, with the senses receiving impressions of objects outside of them. As Fernand Roulier has observed, Pico does not show great interest in sensory cognition as such, yet he does devote several historical theses in the *Conclusions* to the issue.[34] While accepting that a sense power passively receives species, Pico cites from Albertus Magnus that it also "agrees actively in judging a sensible object,"[35] implying that the polarity of passive and active dimensions found in intellect extends also to the senses. Moreover, where Aristotelians had generally distinguished clearly between the functions of external and internal senses, Pico blurs this distinction to the point of erasing it. In particular, as noted above, he denies that the common sense power is actually distinct from the external senses in his dissenting philosophical conclusions.[36] Perhaps the greatest upshot for the cognitive process of this denial appears in his treatment of abstraction. Where more orthodox Aristotelians would hold that abstraction of the universal species presupposed the formation of a composite image (the phantasm) in the interior senses, Pico proposes that "a universal image [*species universalis*] can be abstracted immediately from an image existing in an exterior sense."[37] Leen Spruit has interpreted this as a kind of "immediate abstraction," which bypasses the role given to the internal senses in the production of species. In this way, Pico rejects the traditional theory of abstraction but preserves the place of sensory experience in the acquisition of knowledge.[38]

This leads to a complexity in his position on species, which must be distinguished into "universal species" and "intelligible species." On the one hand, Pico affirms that the human soul requires species in order to understand things distinct from itself. Despite the soul's intellectual nature, which exists in it at the same time but in a higher mode than

[34] Roulier, *Jean Pic de la Mirandole*, 378.

[35] *Conclusions* 1.13. In Aquinas's account, the external senses were passive, receiving sensible species from objects; thus the eye, on seeing a colored object, would receive that species of color, but no judgment would occur until the species had been abstracted and impressed on the intellect.

[36] *Conclusions* 2>30. *Conclusions* 2>58 seems to extend the point with respect to the three other interior senses (imaginative, cogitative, memorative), though they are said not to "differ from the sensitive powers of the interior senses" (ed. and trans. Farmer, 388–9), which they are standardly taken to be.

[37] *Conclusions* 2>1 (ed. and trans. Farmer, 372–3): "Potest a specie in sensu exteriori existente immediate abstrahi species uniuersalis."

[38] Leen Spruit, *Species Intelligibilis: From Perception to Knowledge*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 2:30.

its rational nature, "there is nothing intrinsic in it [the soul] through which it is able, without the appropriate image [*sine propria specie*], to understand something distinct from itself."[39] On the other hand, as we have just seen, Pico denies that intelligible species are abstracted from phantasms.[40] While these positions appear contradictory, they actually indicate that there are two tracks on which knowledge runs: a lower track which begins with sensory perception and serves the cognitive needs of mundane existence, and a higher track which makes use of intelligibles present to the soul from its beginning.

These two tracks serve Pico's purpose of harmonizing Aristotelian and Platonic theories of knowledge, as Stephen Farmer has pointed out.[41] Pico makes a clear reference to these two distinct modes of knowledge in a thesis drawn from Albertus Magnus: "A separated soul understands through images [*per species*] that were co-created within it at its origin, which while it is in the body it either never or rarely uses."[42] The embodied soul relies on "universal images" (which Farmer calls "lower universals") abstracted directly from the sense powers and then handed over to the rational power to frame propositions by composing and dividing terms and reasoning to new conclusions on their basis. In his own conclusions, Pico will allow that the rational soul "can discourse and operate without conjunction to phantasmata,"[43] but as we have seen in his earlier works, it is only to the few that this higher track is accessible.

III. Cognitive Ascent

Nevertheless, it is the higher track of knowledge to which Pico summons the reader to ascend, and its modes that form the substance of Pico's conception of knowledge. As we have seen previously, there is a progression

[39] *Conclusions* 3>63 (ed. and trans. Farmer, 418–19): "... nihil tamen intrinsecum est in ea, per quod possit sine propria specie aliquid a se distinctum intelligere."

[40] *Conclusions* 2>31; see also 2>77, in which he rejects abstraction as the "first operation" of the intellect. In the very first of the historical conclusions, he cites Albertus Magnus as denying the need for intelligible species altogether: "Intelligible images are not necessary, and it is not fitting for good Aristotelians to posit them" (1.1, ed. and trans. Farmer, 212–3). As Farmer notes, this actually reverses Albert's view, yet serves a polemical purpose for Pico (*Syncretism in the West*, 213 n. 1.1).

[41] Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 102–5.

[42] *Conclusions* 1.6 (ed. and trans. Farmer, 214–5): "Anima separata intelligit per species sibi a principio sui esse concreatas, quibus dum est in corpore aut nunquam aut raro utitur."

[43] *Conclusions* 5>19 (ed. and trans. Farmer, 442–3): "Possibile est ut pars rationalis animae nostrae, quam secundum peripateticos possibilem intellectum uoco, ad hoc perueniat, ut sine coniunctione ad phantasmata discurrat et operetur."

in cognition from the senses and imagination to reason and finally to contemplation, which is paralleled by a progression in being from brute animal to philosopher, or "heavenly animal," and finally to contemplator, who is a "divinity clothed with human flesh." We return now to this grand cognitive journey to which Pico exhorts the reader in the *Oration*, in order to depict its stages in some detail. In essence, the impetus for the journey lies in the recognition that the human being contains a share of all natures and can thus actualize any nature in himself. If he is to ascend and "compete with the angels in dignity and glory," he must model his life after that of the angels.[44] Yet since knowledge of their exalted life and activities is beyond our grasp, we must consult the sacred and philosophical authorities who knew most intimately the realities above.

Implicitly, Pico's *Oration* is a meditation on human self-knowledge and the goal and methods for realizing the highest capabilities inherent in ourselves. We may begin with self-knowledge as the first mode of knowledge extending beyond the reach of reason. Self-knowledge appears as a topic throughout Pico's works[45] and presents a conspicuous challenge to Pico's project of reconciling Platonically inspired epistemologies with a more Aristotelian perspective. In the *Oration*, Pico cites the three Delphic precepts, aligning them with a pattern that governs the first part of the address, in which moral and dialectical training purify the soul, the knowledge of nature illuminates it, and knowledge of divine things perfects it. The second Delphic precept, "Know thyself," Pico interprets as an injunction to know oneself as a medium for knowledge of the whole of nature, given that all natures are in the human being:

> Then that *gnōthi seauton*, that is, know thyself, arouses us and urges us toward the knowledge of all nature, of which man's nature is the medium and, as it were, the union. For he who knows himself, knows all things in himself, as first Zoroaster and then Plato wrote in the *Alcibiades*.[46]

[44] *Oration* (ed. Garin, 110; trans. Wallis, 7).

[45] As early as the *Commento* (II.14; trans. Jayne, 110–1), Pico takes up the theme of the cognitive reflexivity and return of rational soul. Like angelic minds, rational souls have the capacity to return to themselves and ultimately to their cause. By the complete return to their cause, they achieve bliss. See *Conclusions* 2>74: "I say that according to Thomas it must be said that our beatitude consists in a reflexive act of the intellect." See also *Conclusions* 17.3 and 17.4.

[46] *Oratio* (ed. Garin, 124; trans. Wallis, 14–15): "Tum illud *gnōthi seauton*, idest cognosce te ipsum, ad totius naturae nos cognitionem, cuius et interstitium et quasi cynnus natura est hominis, excitat et inhortatur. Qui enim se cognoscit, in se omnia cognoscit, ut Zoroaster prius, deinde Plato in *Alcibiade* scripserunt." The latter reference is to *Alcibiades* I 132C, which Pico cites again in *Heptaplus* 4, proem.

This passage expresses a duality between self-knowledge as (1) the launching point toward all other knowledge and (2) the locus in which all knowledge resides. The details of this seemingly reciprocal relationship between knowledge of self and knowledge of nature are broached in the *Conclusions*. In the paradoxical conclusions introducing new doctrines, Pico advances two theses about self-knowing that stand out as radical against an Aristotelian epistemology, which makes the intellect's understanding itself the result of understanding other things. Pico instead asserts that "the soul understands nothing in act and distinctly except itself."[47] Not surprisingly, this thesis was among those attacked by the papal commission set up by Innocent VIII. In the *Apologia*, composed in 1487 in defense of the rejected theses, Pico replied that in this instance "I am speaking about that act of understanding which is called hidden intelligence [*intelligere abditum*], of which Henry [of Ghent] speaks in his ninth *Quodlibet*, and Augustine often in the book *De Trinitate*."[48] This line did not satisfy the papal commission, which determined that the conclusion was false and "not to the understanding of the doctors whom he adduces." It has also been a dividing point among interpreters on opposite sides of the minimizing and maximizing debate. Dulles regarded this as the "weakest section" of the *Apologia*, while Cassirer treated it seriously as the "occult linkage" (*occulta concatenatio*) holding Pico's thought together.[49]

Second, building upon the previous thesis, Pico makes the soul's self-knowledge the basis of its knowledge of all other things, directly echoing the *Oration*: "The soul always understands itself, and understanding itself in some way understands all beings."[50] If the soul understands itself in the

[47] *Conclusions* 3>60 (ed. and trans. Farmer, 418–19): "Nihil intelligit actu et distincte anima, nisi se ipsam."

[48] The *Apologia* can be found in the 1572 Basel edition of the *Opera*, reprinted as Joannes Picus Mirandulanus, *Opera omnia* (Turin: Bottega D'Erasmo, 1971), 114–240. I have cited from the text in Léon Dorez and Louis Thuasne, *Pic de la Mirandole en France (1485–1488)* (Paris: Leroux, 1897), 137: "Loquor de illo actu intelligendi, qui dicitur intelligere abditum, cujus memorat Henricus non Quodlibet, et Augustinus sepe in libro de Trinitate."

[49] See Dulles, *Princeps Concordiae*, 139–40, and Cassirer, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," 19. As Dulles noted, Petrus Garsias (1440–1505) argued against Pico that if such knowledge is said to be "hidden," it is not actual but latent.

[50] *Conclusions* 3>62 (ed. and trans. Farmer, 418–19): "Anima seipsam semper intelligit, et se intelligendo quodammodo omnia entia intelligit." The passage is discussed in Michael J. B. Allen, "Cultura Hominis: Giovanni Pico, Marsilio Ficino and the Idea of Man," in *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Convegno internazionale di Studi nel Cinquecentesimo Anniversario della Morte (1494–1994)*, ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini (Florence: Leo. S. Olschki, 1997),

first instance, and by that means understands everything else, it must have available to it innate species or images of things other than itself. This is indeed what Pico has in mind, but he greatly curtails its application, as we have seen, when he says that intellection does not take place without use of sensible species. In the *Heptaplus*, Pico returns to this theme of the primacy of self-knowing when he writes that the intellect, itself intelligible, has a kind of inner light by which it can see itself but not other things. It needs the forms and ideas of things, like rays of invisible light, for the intelligible truth to be clearly discerned.[51]

This restriction brings us back to the scholastic place where we began: despite having innate species of things (which no good Aristotelian would allow), the human soul must still rely on images, or acquired species, to know things outside itself. Pico's attempt to integrate philosophical traditions, which promises to enrich each, nevertheless has its price: for all practical purposes, the soul equipped with the keys to all knowledge has its wings clipped. How then is it supposed to take flight to the higher levels of knowing?

The sweeping cognitive ascent envisioned in the *Oration* indicates that we are to move from our rational nature to our intellectual nature and finally up to God by imitating the angels. We have seen previously how both rational and intellectual natures are present in the human knower and how the intellectual nature, akin to the angelic intellect, is constrained by the usual conditions of human experience to rely on information gained from without. In what way is the human mind able to reach the threshold of angelic knowing? Pico describes the angelic life in the following terms, paying special attention to the cherubim, who symbolize intelligence in the angelic order:

> The seraph burns with the fire of charity; the cherub shines with the radiance of intelligence; the throne stands in steadfastness of judgment. Hence, if, dedicated to an active life, we undertake the care of lower things with a right weighing of them, we shall be made steadfast in the fixed firmness of the thrones. If, being tired of actions and meditating on the workman in the work, on the work in the workman, we are busy with the leisure of

173–96, at 189–91, who links it with Aristotle's statements in *De anima* that the soul is in a way all things.

[51] *Heptaplus* 5.1 (ed. Garin, 288; trans. Carmichael, 128): "[I]ntellectus ipse intelligibilis cum sit intimae aliquid lucis habet, qua se ipsum potest videre, sed non potest et reliqua. Verum indiget formis ideisque rerum quibus, uti radiis quibusdam invisibilis lucis, intelligibilis veritas indubie cernitur."

> contemplation, we shall flash on every side with cherubic light. If by charity we, with his devouring fire, burn for the Workman alone, we shall suddenly burst into flame in the likeness of a seraph.[52]

Contemplation, associated with the cherubim, thus belongs in the middle position between the active life of moral virtue, symbolized by the thrones, and the unitive perfection realized in perfected love, which belongs to the highest angelic order of seraphim. This middle position corresponds to the knowledge of nature with which our self-knowledge corresponds, as we have seen.

In setting out the course of philosophical study, Pico places natural philosophy above dialectic and moral philosophy, which purify the mind in preparation for this first threshold of knowledge. Indeed, natural philosophy, usually subordinated to moral philosophy and metaphysics, is here treated as the portal to knowledge of the divine:

> Therefore, by rivaling the life of a cherub upon the earth, by confining the onslaughts of the affections by means of moral science, and by shaking off the mist of reason by means of dialectic, as if washing off the filth of ignorance and vice, let us purge the soul, that the affections may not audaciously run riot, nor an imprudent reason sometime rave. Then, over a soul which has been set in order and purified, let us pour the light of natural philosophy, that lastly we may perfect it with the knowledge of divine things.[53]

The Dionysian triad of purification, illumination, and perfection is applied not only to frame the life of cherubim, which we are to emulate, but is also mapped onto the philosophical pedagogy that leads up to and beyond the limits of philosophy.

While the cherubim are described by Dionysius as being purified, illuminated, and perfected, they nonetheless correspond most directly with

[52] *Oration* (ed. Garin, 110; trans. Wallis, 7): "Ardet Saraph caritatis igne; fulget Cherub intelligentiae splendore; stat Thronus iudicii firmitate. Igitur si actuosae addicti vitae inferiorum curam recto examine susceperimus, Thronorum stata soliditate firmabimur. Si ab actionibus feriati, in opificio opificem, in opifice opificium meditantes, in contemplandi ocio negociabimur, luce cherubica undique corruscabimus. Si caritate ipsum opificem solum ardebimus, illius igne, qui edax est, in saraphicam effigiem repente flammabimur."

[53] *Oration* (ed. Garin, 112–14; trans. Wallis, 9): "[E]rgo et nos cherubicam in terris vitam aemulantes, per moralem scientiam affectuum impetus coercentes, per dialecticam rationis caliginem discutientes, quasi ignorantiae et vitiorum eluentes sordes animam purgemus, ne aut affectus temere debacchentur aut ratio imprudens quandoque deliret. Tum bene compositam ac expiatam animam naturalis philosophiae lumine perfundamus, ut postremo divinarum rerum eam cognitione perficiamus."

illumination in relation to the lower and higher orders of angels, which represent purification and perfection, respectively. Since illumination consists for us in natural philosophy, we may focus on what is meant by natural philosophy and how it presages the final stage of knowledge of the divine. Pico explores the Dionysian triad through a variety of authorities, ranging from St. Paul to Jewish scriptural authors (Jacob, Job, and Moses) to Greek philosophers (Plato, Pythagoras, and the Dephic precepts) and finally to the ancient theology of the Chaldeans (Zoroaster).

Pico appeals to the image of Jacob's ladder to illustrate the relationship of the three orders of philosophy. As angels ascend and descend the many steps of the ladder, so must we, but the hands and feet that touch the ladder must first be washed "in moral philosophy as in living water."[54] The ladder itself is a figure of nature, and the contrasting movements of descending and ascending refer, respectively, to the analysis of the one into the many and the gathering of the many into one. The movements up and down the ladder refer to contemplation of the mysteries of nature, which culminates when the summit is reached and union with the Lord and Father is attained. While it is clear that engagement with philosophy is to begin with a disciplining of the lower powers of the soul – "feet" refers to the nutritive faculty and "hands" to the irascible appetite – the study of natural philosophy appears to be reiterative, as the upward and downward motions indicate, rather than purely ascensional. The question then remains: does natural philosophy lead directly to union with the divine?

The beginning of an answer to this question appears in the analysis of Job's contribution to this cloud of witnesses. Pico calls on the authority of Job to attest to the divinely willed aspiration that the soul, which is naturally in a state of conflict, seek peace in the highest degree. Pico recalls from Empedocles the theme of the two natures established in the soul, one of which is drawn upward toward heaven, while the other is dragged downward to the lower world. In the face of this perpetual inner conflict, the whole range of philosophy – from ethics to dialectic and even to natural philosophy – can serve only to calm the conflict and remind us that "our nature is born of war." Here a discontinuity with reason is marked, and theology is given highest place: "in natural philosophy true quiet and lasting peace cannot offer themselves to us . . . this is the office

[54] *Oration* (ed. Garin, 114; trans. Wallis, 9). The biblical *locus* for Jacob's ladder is Genesis 28:12–13.

and prerogative of their mistress, most holy theology."[55] This theological peace is otherwise characterized as a friendship in which minds "do not merely accord in one intellect that is above every intellect but in some inexpressible fashion become absolutely one."[56] While this would imply perfect union with the divine intellect, if not unicity of the intellect, Pico observes further that by this peace men might ascend to heaven and become angels, as angels once descended to declare this peace among men.[57]

The threefold path is further recapitulated and allegorized through Moses's commands, which are interpreted as (1) admission to the sanctuary for those cleansed by the adoption of new morals, (2) permission to handle the sacred things for those devoted to dialectic, (3) ordination to the "priesthood of philosophy" for those contemplating the symbols of creation, and finally (4) admission to the sanctuary of the temple for those prepared to enjoy the divine presence without any intervening image.[58] The appeals to sacred authorities provide a defense for the study of philosophy as the divinely appointed path to illumination and eventual glory. When Pico moves beyond the Mosaic and Christian economies of law and grace to the *prisca theologia* of the Greek and Chaldeans, he offers further clues as to the dignity of natural philosophy and its proximity to the highest mysteries. Among the Greeks, there were degrees of initiation, beginning with the moral and dialectical arts, which were purgative and preparatory to the reception of the mysteries. Pico takes these mysteries to refer to the uncovering of the secrets of nature by means of philosophy and to the discovery of the invisible things of God through the contemplation of the visible signs of nature.[59] For those properly purified and illumined, their journey culminates with

[55] *Oration* (ed. Garin, 118; trans. Wallis, 11): "...idcirco in ea [naturalis philosophia] veram quietem et solidam pacem se nobis praestare non posse, esse hoc dominae suae, idest sanctissimae theologiae, munus et privilegium." Pico alludes at this point to Heraclitus, fragment 53, which can be found in translation in Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 28.

[56] *Oration* (ed. Garin, 118; trans. Wallis, 11): "...pace sanctissima, individua copula, unanimi amicitia, qua omnes animi in una mente, quae est super omnem mentem, non concordent adeo, sed ineffabili quodam modo unum penitus evadant."

[57] *Oration* (trans. Wallis, 12).

[58] *Oration* (ed. Garin, 120, 122; trans. Wallis, 12–13).

[59] *Oration* (trans. Wallis, 14). There is an unacknowledged allusion to the famous statement of St. Paul: "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead" (Romans 1:20 [NJKV]).

a "vision of divine things by means of the light of theology," known as *epopteia*.[60]

From the Greek mysteries Pico turns our attention to the three Delphic precepts and the four precepts of Pythagoras. The first of the Delphic precepts, "Nothing too much" (*mēden agan*), points to moderation as the foundation of virtue and moral discipline. The second precept, "Know thyself," as we have seen, connects knowledge of self with knowledge of all nature, on the premise that human nature contains the seeds of all of nature. Finally, on the basis of that reciprocal knowledge of self and nature, the third and final precept, "Thou art" (*ei*), bids us to address the true Apollo (i.e., Christ) in familiar terms.[61] Among the four precepts from Pythagoras adduced in the *Oration*, the first urges the dialectical training of the rational part of the soul, while the second and third demand restraint of the appetites and impulses of our sensual nature. The final precept is "Feed the cock," which means that we must "nourish the divine part of our soul with knowledge of divine things as with solid food and heavenly ambrosia."[62] On Pico's interpretation, the "cock" which requires to be fed with the highest knowledge is *nous*, or the power of pure intellect in us, at whose impulse we are recalled from error.

Pico turns finally to Zoroaster to illustrate the cognitive journey of the soul as depicted among the Chaldeans. If the soul once had wings, as Zoroaster taught, on losing them it fell into the body; in order to ascend again, it must sprout new wings that are moistened with the waters of life. These waters come from the four rivers in the paradise of God, named Pischon (straight), Dichon (atonement), Chidekel (light), and Perath (piety). Each plays a role according to the fundamental structure of purification, illumination, and perfection, as Pico explains:

> [C]onsider carefully that these doctrines of Zoroaster really mean nothing else than that by moral science, as by western waters, we may wash dirt from our eyes; by dialectic, as by a ruler pointing north, we may direct our eyesight along a straight line. Then, let us accustom our eyes in natural contemplation to bear the still weak light of truth, the beginning of the rising sun, as it were, so that finally by theological piety and the most sacred worship of God, we

[60] *Oration* (trans. Wallis, 13).
[61] *Oration* (trans. Wallis, 15).
[62] *Oration* (ed. Garin, 126; trans. Wallis, 15): "Postremo ut gallum nutriamus nos admonebit, idest ut divinam animae nostrae partem divinarum rerum cognitione quasi solido cibo et caelesti ambrosia pascamus."

> may, like the eagles of heaven, endure bravely the very radiant brightness of the midday sun. . . . This is that midday light, which, perpendicular, inflames the Seraphim, and at the same time illuminates the Cherubim.[63]

Mixing metaphors of water and light, Pico is able to illustrate still more vividly the progression through the stages of philosophical practice to theological completion. Moral philosophy frees the senses from extraneous impediments; dialectic straightens and reorients the rational power of the mind; contemplation marks the beginning of the new day in which the eyes gradually adjust to the light of truth; yet this illumination is perfected only when the sun is directly overhead and the soul wholly open to its influence. With this example, the distinction between natural and theological knowledge is underscored, since natural philosophy does not suffice to illuminate the soul. As in the example from Job, the movement upward to the highest reality requires an infusion from a source beyond the soul and the order of nature.

When we turn from the high-flying rhetoric of the *Oration* to the prosaic sobriety of the later philosophical works, do we find Pico fleshing out this program of gradual ascent from our lower natures to our highest angelic, even godlike, capacities? In *On Being and the One* (1491), Pico emphasizes the imperfection of the various stages of knowledge, from sensory to rational to intellectual. With respect to sensory perception, he presents the scholastic view that sense reaches only to the accidental qualities of things:

> Sensible knowledge [*cognitio*] is not imperfect merely . . . because it is imperfect knowledge, [and] not only because it requires a brute and corporeal organ, but also because it only attains the surfaces of things. It does not penetrate to the interior, that is, to the substance.[64]

As belonging to our animal nature and incapable of reaching the essences of things, sensory cognition is the lowest type of cognition,

[63] *Oration* (ed. Garin 128; trans. Wallis, 16): "[D]iligenter considerate . . . quid haec sibi velint Zoroastris dogmata: profecto nihil aliud nisi ut morali scientia, quasi undis hiberici, oculorum sordes expiemus; dialectica, quasi boreali amussi, illorum aciem liniemus ad rectum. Tum in naturali contemplatione debile adhuc veritatis lumen, quasi nascentis solis incunabula, pati assuescamus, ut tandem per theologicam pietatem et sacratissimum Dei cultum, quasi caelestes aquilae, meridiantis solis fulgidissimum iubar fortiter perferamus. . . . Haec est illa lux meridialis, quae Seraphinos ad lineam inflammat et Cherubinos pariter illuminat."

[64] *De ente et uno* 5 (ed. Garin, 408; trans. Miller, 47): "[C]ognitio sensualis non ideo solum imperfecta est . . . quia et imperfecta cognitio est, tum quia organo eget bruto et corporali, tum quia extrema solum attingit rerum, ad intima, idest ad substantiam, non pervadit."

misleadingly termed "knowledge" (*scientia*). Yet it is a starting point for a genuine type of knowledge produced by abstraction and reasoning.

In the *Conclusions*, Pico follows his scholastic predecessors when he claims that rational knowledge is at once the highest human mode of knowing but the lowest order of pure cognition: "Just as knowledge through demonstration, due to the general state that we experience here, is the most perfect knowledge had by man, so simply speaking among all knowledge it is the most imperfect."[65] In *On Being and the One*, he is even more pointed about the imperfection and inadequacy of rational knowledge: "That human knowledge which is called rational is, in turn, imperfect knowledge because it is vague, uncertain, shifting, and laborious."[66] This denigration of rational knowledge seems far removed from his extolling of the rational power as befitting a "heavenly being" worthy of veneration in the *Oration*. How is this dramatic contrast to be understood?

As is well known, there is a marked difference in tone from the *Oration* to *On Being and the One*. In the *Oration*, it is not so much the imperfection of the lower power as the relative perfection of the higher power that impels one to go higher. In *On Being and the One*, however, Pico points even to the imperfection of angelic knowledge, despite the fact that it requires no reasoning since it reaches its object directly: "Even that [the intellectual knowledge of angels] is imperfect knowledge, at least because it seeks outside itself what it does not possess fully within itself, i.e., the light of truth which it lacks, and by which it is perfected."[67] There is therefore no perfection of knowledge until it has been drawn up to the divine level, where the known object and knower are one and the same.

While the *Oration* emphasized human freedom from a fixed nature, and the marvelous capacity to ascend the levels of being in knowledge, in his later, perhaps more sober, works, Pico emphasized instead the infirmity of human intelligence. This may give Pico scholars some pause when making the *Oration* the cornerstone of his treatment of knowledge. Yet while the later works clearly differ from the *Oration* in context, intent, and

[65] *Conclusions* 3>6 (ed. and trans. Farmer, 400–1): "Sicut cognitio per demonstrationem habita homini, pro communi statu quem hic experimur, est perfectissima cognitioo, ita simpliciter inter cognitiones est imperfectissima."

[66] *De ente et uno* 5 (ed. Garin, 408; trans. Miller, 47): "Cognitio item humana quae rationalis dicitur, imperfecta cognitio est, quia vaga, incerta, mobilis, laboriosa."

[67] *De ente et uno* 5 (ed. Garin, 408; trans. Miller, 47): "[E]t ipsa etiam imperfecta cognitio est, vel ob id saltem quod extra se quaerit quod intra se scilicet plene no possidet, hoc est veritatis lucem qua eget et qua perficitur."

emphasis, there is a discernible consistency between them in philosophical doctrine. While the higher level of being and knowledge is perfect relative to the level just below it, all knowledge remains imperfect until it has been fully illuminated and united to its object. The imitation of the seraphim, which forms such a substantial part of the argument of the *Oration*, itself reminds us that they too must undergo an illumination in order to climb up to the height at which God dwells. If their journey appears shorter, or relatively easier, than the human journey, that is a mark in favor of the dignity and wonder of human nature, which more fully represents the actualization of all possibilities.

IV. Conclusion

Since Pico wrote no systematic account of mind or of knowledge, assessing whether he offers a coherent account of these topics is a challenging task for his interpreter. In examining Pico's treatment of knowledge, we have considered various tensions that seem to characterize it. Like other philosophers, he attempts to reconcile Platonic and Aristotelian epistemologies, which leads him to a bifurcation of knowledge into higher and lower tracks. He employs a scholastic model of the soul's powers, yet includes a power of pure intellect that does not properly belong to the human state. He builds upon the scholastic account of the cognitive process, but modifies it to accommodate innate knowledge in addition to acquired knowledge. He gives various, even apparently conflicting, assessments of the value and completeness of stages of knowledge falling short of the divine paradigm wherein knower and known are identical. If, like Dulles and others, we think that knowledge was never Pico's real focus, we may conclude that Pico was merely tinkering with inherited models of knowing and felt no need to present a coherent epistemology of his own. If, on the other hand, there is some hidden key to all knowledge, as Cassirer and others supposed, the study of Pico's most explicit remarks on the subject do not reveal it. Perhaps this key is to be found in a deeper or more esoteric study of natural philosophy, or magic, or Kabbalah.

The focus of the present study on the stages of cognition has brought to light a common link that runs the length of Pico's works: namely, the ability and imperative of the mind to ascend from level to level without resting until it reaches the perfection of knowledge. This theme of cognitive ascent is present, as we have seen, in the rather crude exclusivity between the senses and the intellect in the early *Commento*, in the possibility of illumination in the *Heptaplus*, and in the insufficiency of all

created knowledge in the late work *On Being and the One*. Nevertheless, it is presented in the greatest detail in the *Oration*, which explains how the ascent of cognitive powers constitutes a remaking of human nature at the angelic or even divine levels of being. The ascent is illustrated by a pedagogy that passes through the philosophical disciplines on its way to a divine wisdom that is revealed in theology. While the ascent in knowledge to higher levels of being seems to be central to much of the *Oration*, Pico reminds the reader that love is ultimately higher than knowledge, as the seraphim are closer to God than the cherubim.

If the imitation of the angels requires the practice of philosophy, and philosophy the exercise of disputation, there is a sense in which the *Oration* must forever appear to be a project interrupted, its promises never fulfilled. There is a grand design, but the details are not provided by Pico. So it may seem with Pico's treatment of knowledge, which builds a mystical superstructure on a medieval foundation. While the *Conclusions* provides fixed points for dialectical exploration, the lack of any resolution of the theses makes it impossible to draw Pico's complete philosophical map, let alone to insert it into the method Pico sketches in the *Oration* for realizing the fullness of human capacity. Nevertheless, Pico's work – truncated as it is in its execution – advances the philosophical enterprise in a remarkable way by uniting at once the precision and complexity of medieval philosophical discourse with the soaring aspirations of ancient philosophical and wisdom traditions. Of course, many of Pico's assumptions and intentions appear ill-conceived to us, such as confirming the truth of Christianity through Kabbalah or maintaining that magic is the highest form of natural philosophy. Yet his fundamental theme of the human being transcending itself by reaching to its highest capacities and availing itself of every available source of wisdom remains enticing and topical. Pico's own quest for all knowledge is probably not resolvable into any single model of mind or theory of knowledge, but it provides an exceptionally rich opportunity to ponder the vast legacy of philosophical reflection available to the Renaissance thinker.[68]

[68] I wish to thank Michael Dougherty, Alan Reese, and Sarah Powrie for reading drafts of this study and providing many useful suggestions. I have also benefited from discussion of a paper I presented on this theme at a research workshop sponsored by the Classical, Medieval, and Renaissance Studies program at the University of Saskatchewan.

9

A Life in Works

Francesco Borghesi

I. A Historiographical Problem

Why is the life of an author and particularly that of a philosopher of any interest? The belief that philosophy was something with a *history* originated, at least in the West, with Diogenes Laertius in his *Lives of the Philosophers*. All the same, if the life of a philosopher is a *bios theoretikos*, and what matters in philosophy is *theoria*, what is the value of a *bios* as such?[1]

As Eugenio Garin has often noted, a study of the fortune and reception of Pico's thought over the course of time is long overdue. The philosopher's reputation has varied significantly; in the last century, it was subject to reactions that were alternately too "modern" or too conservative. In the nineteenth century, the figure of Pico struggled to disentangle itself from a web of fantastical anecdotes that presented him as a young wealthy nobleman of prodigious memory, a connoisseur of arcane disciplines, an expert in oriental languages, a man condemned by the church, and a friend of both Lorenzo de' Medici and Girolamo Savonarola. Despite this trend, a number of French historians and Italian scholars did manage to publish a wealth of unknown documents and archival material that became the basis for research in the next century.

In the twentieth century, the situation underwent a profound change. As Garin once again noted, Pico's significance and contribution to the age of humanism, especially in the fields of philosophy and science, were reconsidered. It was in this period that methodologies changed

[1] Roberto Brigati considers the problem in a different context in "Il maestro Wittgenstein: Note su personalità e pensiero di un filosofo," in *Wittgenstein and Freud*, ed. Mauro Mancia (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2005), 76–87, at 76.

and the debate shifted. Problems were viewed from fresh perspectives, and sources were subject to new analytical tools. In addition, the general acceptance of the notion of a "waning Middle Ages" cast what was believed to be the dawn of a new world in a different light. Thus began the realization that a revolution in the "disciplines," in their relationship to each other, in the manners in which they had traditionally been taught, and in their canonical texts, would not leave the domain of learning untouched. It became increasingly clear that access to any imposing collection of texts – classical or otherwise – was bound to resurrect ancient problems and to disclose many new ones.[2]

At a conference on the "two Picos" held in Mirandola in 1994, Garin, reflecting on his many years of research and thoughts on Pico, set an example for everyone by asking how and where one might classify a text such as the *Commentary on a Canzone of Benivieni.* In this case, do we find ourselves on the terrain of poetry, mythology, the figurative arts, religion, or philosophy? Are we dealing here with Girolamo Benivieni or Marsilio Ficino, Plato or Jewish mysticism? In order to annotate the text properly, is our knowledge of Greek and Latin – in addition to the Florentine vernacular – sufficient, or do we need ancient Hebrew as well? It seems reasonable to claim that it is the entire field of so-called Quattrocento humanism that is being transformed. Poetry and philosophy, but likewise literature and the sciences, converge in new formations as techniques and arts experience shifts in methods, boundaries, and relationships.[3]

Undoubtedly there was a new approach to Pico in the early twentieth century. Problematic texts such as the *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem* were republished after many centuries. In many cases, works of considerable importance were set in print for the first time since 1601 – certainly not in critical editions but now complete with the reinsertion of their previously censored portions. Unknown documents emerged. As Garin continuously noted, in Italy and more broadly in Europe, the encounter was often with an author whose works were largely unfamiliar or who appeared with a new face very contemporary in its fervent, youthful defense of eternal, but endangered values. Between 1936 and 1942, one partial and two complete editions of Pico's works (with original and translated text) were published in Italy, in addition to an Italian

[2] Eugenio Garin, "Ricordando Giovanni e Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola," *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana* 74 (1995): 5–19, at 8–9.

[3] Ibid., 8.

translation without the Latin text as well as a German and two English translations. Further editions and translations proceeded apace in subsequent years.[4]

It is difficult not to recall, as Garin himself has emphasized, that these were precisely the years of the triumphant spread of Nazi and Fascist racist ideology, of the Second World War and its aftermath. What struck scholars at the time was Pico's staunch defense of man as an exponent of absolute liberty, his longing for universal peace, and his faith in the value of culture.

In any case, and apart from other considerations, in 1994 Garin, reflecting on a century of studies on Pico, observed that despite the vast production of critical works on the philosopher in the second half of the twentieth century, as well as the growing number of translations and editions of his writings beyond the *Oratio de hominis dignitate*, one of the most important lacuna (in his opinion) remained to be filled – namely, an in-depth analysis of the existence of two Picos in European culture from the sixteenth century on. The plural, *two Picos*, must be stressed. Indeed, without succumbing to the mistake of setting the passion and intellectual courage of Giovanni Pico against the very different nature of his nephew Gianfrancesco, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the joint publication of their works in the Basel editions of 1572–3 and 1601 reflected in some way a connection between the two, manifested, ever since the Quattrocento, in the biography of Giovanni written by his nephew and even more so in their significant epistolary exchange. Clearly this – as Garin once again emphasized – does not resolve the complex problems regarding questions of doctrine occasioned by the rapport between uncle and nephew, which range from the former's ties to Savonarola to his polemic against astrology and include the crucial matter of Gianfrancesco's use of his uncle Giovanni's unpublished manuscripts and more generally his letters. It is precisely in this area that there is still a need for a more thorough assessment of the dialectical rapport between the concordance of philosophical systems sustained by Giovanni at the end of his *900 Theses* and further developed in *De ente et uno* and the formulation of Gianfrancesco's greatest and best-known work, the *Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium et veritatis disciplinae* (first published in Mirandola in 1520), an apologetic Christian text confuting all philosophy and containing

[4] See now the bibliography in Leonardo Quaquarelli and Zita Zanardi, *Pichiana: Bibliografia delle edizioni e degli studi* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2005), 321–32.

a discussion specifically directed at Aristotle and Aristotelianism based principally on the works of Sextus Empiricus.[5] But let us now come to the facts.

II. Formation: Bologna and Ferrara, Padua and Aristotelianism

Giovanni Pico dei Conti di Mirandola e Concordia was born in the castle of Mirandola on February 24, 1463, when – according to the tale related by his nephew Gianfrancesco – a circle of fire appeared for a split second over his mother's bed. Of his two sisters, Caterina and Lucrezia, the first married Lionello Pio da Carpi in 1473 and the second Pino

[5] Garin, "Ricordando Giovanni e Gianfrancesco," 14–15. Giovanni's life by Gianfrancesco appears for the first time in the *editio princeps* of the former's writings edited by the latter in the 1496 Bologna edition published by Benedetto Faelli. For the Latin text side by side with an Italian translation, see *Ioannis Pici Mirandulae viri omni disciplinarum genere consumatissimi vita per Ioannem Franciscum illustris principis Galeotti Pici filium conscripta*, ed. Tommaso Sorbelli (Modena: Aedes Muratoriana, 1963). The Latin text with an exceptional English translation can also be found in Thomas More, *English Poems, Life of Pico, The Last Things*, vol. 1 of *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, ed. Anthony S. G. Edwards et al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 294–341. For an accurate description of the Basel editions of 1572–73 and 1601, consult Quaquarelli and Zanardi, *Pichiana*, 188–91, 301–4. On Pico's relationship to Savonarola and the influence of the latter's thought on his works, see Gian Carlo Garfagnini's indispensable studies, which are now collected in *"Questa è la terra tua": Savonarola a Firenze* (Florence: SISMEL – Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2000), and to which may now be added his recent article "La questione astrologica tra Savonarola, Giovanni e Giovan Francesco Pico," *Rinascimento* 44 (2004): 17–38. Regarding the *Conclusiones*, aside from S. A. Farmer's contribution in *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486)* (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998), 1–179, see Albano Biondi's introduction to G. Pico della Mirandola, *Conclusiones nongentae: Le novecento Tesi dell'anno 1486*, ed. Albano Biondi (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1995), v–xxxviii, to which may also be added his "La doppia inchiesta sulle *Conclusiones* e le traversie romane di Pico nel 1487," in *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Convegno internazionale di Studi nel Cinquecentesimo Anniversario della Morte (1494–1994)*, ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1997), 197–212, and also the important study by Stefano Caroti, "Note sulle fonti medievali di Pico della Mirandola," *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana* 84 (2005): 60–92. Finally, on Gianfrancesco's rapport with his uncle, it is impossible to skip over the works of Charles B. Schmitt, "Gianfrancesco Pico's Attitude toward his Uncle," in *L'Opera e il pensiero di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola nella storia dell'Umanismo* (Florence: Nella Sede dell'Instituto, 1965), 2:305–13, and *Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533) and His Critique of Aristotle* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), and, more recently, those of Cesare Vasoli, in particular, "Giovan Francesco Pico e i presupposti della sua critica ad Aristotle," in *Renaissance Readings of the Corpus Aristotelicum: Proceedings of the Conference Held in Copenhagen 23–25 April 1998*, ed. Marianne Pade (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2001), 129–46.

Oderlaffi da Forlì in 1475. His brothers, Galeotto and Anton Maria, were perpetually fighting over the estate, nurturing a family feud that would one day cost Gianfrancesco his life.[6] When his father died soon after his birth, Giovanni was raised by his mother, Giulia Boiardo, who wanted him to get started on an ecclesiastical career so early in life that Cardinal Gonzaga granted him the title of apostolic protonotary in 1473. He departed for Bologna at fourteen to study canon law according to the wish of his mother, who died in August 1478, leaving him master of his own destiny. Not interested in the political and financial squabbles that divided his brothers, he decided to pursue studies that were more in line with his own budding interests. In late May 1479, he found himself in Ferrara, where he began to study philosophy at the faculty of arts and also to learn ancient Greek. The intellectual climate of Ferrara offered many attractive disciplines to a curious and refined young man such as Pico: in addition to the Latin language and its literature, taught by Battista Guarini, there was Greek, which was rarely taught as a regular subject in universities and which offered greater analytical depth and new texts to the *studia humanitatis*. At Ferrara, Pico also had the opportunity to make an important acquaintance, Girolamo Savonarola, who was able to perceive Pico's erudition in the public debate that he as protonotary held with Lorenzo Nogarola.

[6] Eugenio Garin, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Vita e dottrina* (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1937), 3. For a recent biography, see M. Fumagalli Beonio Brocchieri, *Pico della Mirandola* (Casale Monferrato, Italy: Edizioni Piemme, 1999), which is inspired by the interesting methodological reflection on the genre of biography as something between "concrete deception" and "illusion" in Jacques Le Goff's *Saint Louis* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996). For a more synthetic version of Pico's life, see the attempt by Giuseppe Tognon in G. Pico della Mirandola, *Discorso sulla dignità dell'uomo*, ed. Giuseppe Tognon (Brescia: Editrice La Scuola, 1987), xx–lvi, from which inspiration was drawn here. For a more accurate assessment of the events that shaped Giovanni Pico's existential and intellectual development, which can never be divorced from each other, consult works intended to provide a general analysis of Pico's intellectual biography. Among these, the most recent cannot be ignored; aside from Henri de Lubac, *Pic de la Mirandole: Études et discussions* (Paris: Éditions Aubier Montaigne, 1974), and William G. Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Symbol of His Age: Modern Interpretations of a Renaissance Philosopher* (Geneva: Libraire Droz, 1981), there are the very different interpretations offered by Fernand Roulier, *Jean Pic de la Mirandole (1463–1494): Humaniste, philosophe et théologien* (Geneva: Editions Slatkine, 1989); Antonino Raspanti, *Filosofia, teologia, religione: L'unità della visione in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola* (Palermo: Edi Oftes, 1991); Francesco Bausi, *Nec rhetor neque philosophus: Fonti, lingua e stile nelle prime opere latine di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1484–1487)* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1996); Pier Cesare Bori, *Pluralità delle vie: Alle origini del* Discorso *sulla dignità umana di Pico della Mirandola* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2000); and Louis Valcke, *Pic de la Mirandole: Un itinéraire philosophique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2005).

Fifteen months later, in 1480, Pico was in Padua to broaden his knowledge of philosophy at what was Italy's most famous university at the time. One must recall that Pico was barely eighteen. He remained here for two academic years, making important contacts and studying Aristotle and his commentators, especially Averroës. It was this discovery of Arabo-Judaic thought that led to his close ties to a group of intellectuals who were actively disseminating such ideas throughout Italy: Girolamo Ramusio and particularly Elia del Medigo. Like many Paduan *magistri*, the latter considered Aristotle "the father of all philosophers" and Averroës "his truest commentator." Elia del Medigo was therefore thoroughly familiar with a little-known work by Averroës, the *Tahâfut al Tahâfut*, or *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, which the Islamic philosopher had written in defense of philosophy while engaged in a polemic with the mystic al-Ghazâlî. It was at the request of Pico himself that Elia composed two works in Latin that survive only in an autograph Hebrew version. Both dealt with the unity of the human intellect, a theory circulating in medieval universities that had already raised the suspicions of theologians such as Thomas Aquinas. Elia directed his polemic precisely against these men, who, he felt, had had the capacity to reach a profound understanding of Averroës but had interpreted his thought incorrectly. Attacking these Latin scholars, whom he called "philosophants" rather than "philosophers," he maintained that there was a single intellective spirit uniting the entire human race.

Again at the request of Pico, Elia came up with many *quaestiones* designed to assist the count in his study of difficult texts of Aristotelian philosophy and Judaic culture. Thus Pico was guided through the thought of Aristotle and Averroës by Elia del Medigo, a course of study that would remain fundamental for him even after his "discovery" of Plato. There was, however, another debt that Pico owed to Elia, namely, his introduction to the Cabala, an intellectual movement of Jewish gnosis influenced by Neoplatonism, which Pico studied with great enthusiasm from the outset.

Another noteworthy individual who Pico met in Padua was the Aristotelian Nicoletto Vernia, a scholar of Averroës who, unlike Elia del Medigo, could read his works only in Latin translation. In his approach, he remained true to Thomas Aquinas. Yet his treatise on the intellect revealed the decisive influence of Averroës in that he claimed that the Christian belief in the immortality of the individual soul could not be founded on philosophical arguments. Giovanni Pico could not have been oblivious to Vernia's predilection for Greek commentators such as Alexander of Aphrodisias, Themistius, Simplicius, and John Philoponus,

although their respective positions were very different; his loyalty to Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas; and especially his attempt to detect harmony in the ideas of the two greatest thinkers of antiquity, Plato and Aristotle.

III. Florence and the Encounter with Plato

Giovanni Pico spent the summer of 1482 in his castle in Mirandola, departing for Pavia in the fall, where he decided to dedicate himself to the study of philosophy, Greek, and rhetoric. Here he also studied late Aristotelian texts, such as those of the *calculatores*, as were called the students and theorists of logics and language and some of the followers of Richard Swineshead, the fourteenth-century theological master at Oxford. Pico's reading of the *calculatores* is still evident in one of his late works, the *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*.

Through Angelo Poliziano, whom he met in Mantua in 1472, Pico began to take an interest in the Florentine literary movement; in 1482 he asked Marsilio Ficino for his *Theologia platonica*. Once again under the influence of Elia del Medigo, he read and meditated on the work of John Philoponus and revised the amorous lyrics that he had begun composing several years earlier. In 1483, an agreement on the division of the family estate having been reached among the brothers, Giovanni at the age of twenty found himself one of the wealthiest men in Italy and free of every practical care.

Pico did not neglect poetry while dedicating himself to philosophy in Padua and Pavia. In May 1483, he sent some of his compositions to Poliziano, who invited him to Florence. A new and decisive stage of the intellectual life of the Count of Mirandola and Concordia was initiated in the city of Lorenzo the Magnificent.

In 1484, Pico read the *Theologia platonica* of Ficino, who later recalled how Pico, seized by enthusiasm, had forced him to tackle Plotinus shortly after he had published his translation of Plato. Nevertheless, Pico took the trouble to assure his friends that he had not deserted the Aristotelian school but was an explorer (*explorator*) of new territory who had not abandoned the ideas of the Ancients. A crowd of various characters gathered around Pico: physicians and Jewish philosophers, Aristotelians, Platonists and poets, scholars of Dante and Petrarch. Standing out among all these was the protective and generous friendship of Lorenzo de' Medici. Even Elia del Medigo followed Pico to Florence, where he continued to work

for him, translating from Hebrew Averroës's paraphrase of Plato's *Republic* as well as some of his logical *quaestiones*. One of Ficino's letters likewise informs us that Elia often held debates in Pico's house on philosophical and religious matters with another converted Jew, Guglielmo Raimondo de Moncada, also known as Flavius Mithridates.

The latter soon began teaching Hebrew to Pico, who was impatient to learn the language of the Bible. It appears that Mithridates was a rather peculiar character with a difficult personality. One day he demanded that if Pico wished to continue his lessons in Aramaic, he should serve as a mediator for a youth from Faenza named Lancillotto, whom Mithridates desired as a lover.

In 1488, after Pico returned to Florence, we come across another erudite Jew, R. Yohanan Alemanno, a physician raised in Tuscany in a family of bankers. Many scholars consider Alemanno one of the most widely learned Jewish intellectuals among Pico's circle of collaborators, capable, among other things, of reading Arabic sources in Hebrew. He found himself writing his commentary on the Song of Songs in a thoroughly homogeneous intellectual climate: Ficino had written his commentary on Plato's *Symposium* and Girolamo Benivieni his *Canzone d'amore*, afterwards annotated by Pico. Love in the latter was presented as a cohesive, cosmic force and energy that elevated man. In his own preface, Alemanno reviewed the qualities and described the intellectual gifts that had graced King Solomon, to whom the Song had been attributed, thereby defining the prototype of the ideal wise man. In determining the merits of the perfect man, Alemanno drew on biblical sources, Talmudic literature, and Arabic philosophical texts to which he had direct access.

Alemanno's commentary met with great success since it dealt with a subject that was much discussed in the cultural milieu of Florence during this period; to it could be added yet another theme, that of the soul's love of God symbolized in the thoroughly sexual ecstasy of the Sulamite woman and King Solomon. The soul experiences seven stages of ascent to God: the first three are part of a purification process by means of which the soul is cleansed. The fourth introduces the Cabala through mental and vocal prayer capable of capturing celestial virtues. In the fifth stage appears the study of the treatises of Zohar. In the sixth, Alemanno develops the theme of the soul's need to influence heavenly assistance through the mediation of prayer. All these stages prepare the soul to raise itself to a higher sphere since it is ignited by God's love. As in other cases, one can observe that it is always love which is the principle energy. Pico

would not have overlooked the Neoplatonic motif of love's circularity, a theme that Alemanno derived from Jewish culture.[7]

IV. 1485

Emphasis is often placed on Giovanni Pico's "official" entrance on the Italian cultural scene in 1485 with his polemic against Ermolao Barbaro, who taught Aristotle in Padua. Toward the end of 1482, Pico wrote him a letter expressing his admiration for the man's learning and his regret that he had not had a chance to meet him during his sojourn in Padua (Barbaro had been in Venice at the time). The two began exchanging letters, which led to Barbaro's critique of the so-called barbarous philosophers, who used plain, overly technical, and dry language. Nowadays Pico's response is viewed as one of the greatest examples of Renaissance rhetoric: it is the celebrated letter entitled *De genere dicendi philosophorum*,

[7] On this theme, see, in addition to Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), Bohdan Kieszkowski, "Le rapports entre Elie del Medigo et Pic de la Mirandole (d'après le ms. lat. 6508 de la Bibliothèque Nationale)," *Rinascimento* 4 (1964): 41–91; Kalman P. Bland, "Elijah del Medigo's Averroist Response to the Kabbalahs of Fifteenth-Century Jewry and Pico della Mirandola," *Journal for Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 1 (1991): 23–53; Alberto Bartòla, "Eliyhau del Medigo e Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: La testimonianza dei codici vaticani," *Rinascimento* 33 (1993): 253–78; Moshe Idel, "The Anthropology of Yohanan Alemanno: Sources and Influences," *Topoi* 7 (1988): 201–10; idem, "The Ladder of Ascension: The Reverberations of a Medieval Motif in the Renaissance," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, vol. 2, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 83–93; and B. C. Novak, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Jochanan Alemanno," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 45 (1982): 125–47. See also Moshe Idel, "Jewish Mystical Thought in the Florence of Lorenzo il Magnifico," in *La cultura ebraica all'epoca di Lorenzo il Magnifico: Celebrazioni nel V centenario della morte di Lorenzo il Magnifico*, ed. D. Liscia Bemporad-I. Zatelli (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1997), 17–42, and these important volumes, Giulio Busi, S. M. Bondoni, and S. Campanini, eds., *The Great Parchment: Flavius Mithridates' Latin Translation, the Hebrew Text, and an English Version* (Turin: Nino Aragno, 2004), and Saverio Campanini, ed., *The Book of Bahir: Flavius Mithridates' Latin Translation, the Hebrew Text, and an English Version* (Turin: Nino Aragno Editore, 2005). On Alemanno see also: Arthur M. Lesley, Jr., *'The Song of Solomon's Ascents' by Yohanan Alemanno: Love and Human Perfection According to a Jewish Colleague of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola* (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1976); M. Idel, "Alemanno, Johanan ben Isaac," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (2006), 1:611–13. Among other works by Fabrizio Lelli one should at least see: "Yohanan Alemanno, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola e la cultura ebraica italiana del XV secolo," in *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Convegno internazionale di Studi nel Cinquecentesimo Anniversario della Morte (1494–1994)*, 303–25, and "Pico tra filosofia ebraica e 'qabbala,'" in *Pico, Poliziano e l'Umanesimo di fine Quattrocento. Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, 4 novembre-31 dicembre 1994*, ed. Paolo Viti (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1994), 193–23.

in which Pico proclaimed that philosophical research need not conform to a single, harmonious style if this impeded the pursuit of truth.[8]

Pico likewise dealt with the relationship between content and form in a long missive to Lorenzo the Magnificent, in which he eulogized him for a collection of poems written in the vernacular. Having exalted the poetical works of the young prince, Pico set up a confrontation between Dante and Petrarch. Here it is possible to discern a hint of Giovanni Pico's literary bent: stylistic analysis grants us a glimpse of his critique of ideas and content. Inasmuch as Petrarch was lacking in content and Dante in form, the author of the letter clearly expressed his preference for Dante. Indeed, Petrarch comes across as a virtuoso, an artist, but not as a thinker; he was too self-satisfied, whereas Dante, who exhibited a very different nature, presented his material with vehemence. Initially fascinating, Petrarch's poetry ultimately proved less satisfying than Dante's profundity. Pico's argument appeared to be based on the philosophical leanings of all three authors. In Lorenzo, Pico praised not so much the poet as the man who could expound Aristotle's *Physics*, *Ethics*, and *De anima* and ideas of the Platonists. In addition, Pico laid stress on the analytical aspects of Lorenzo's annotations in prose that appeared in the margins of his sonnets, which were meant not so much to delight as to heighten consciousness.[9]

Constantly on the move, Pico appeared in Paris in July 1485, at the Sorbonne, where he remained until the beginning of the following year. Although information on this period is scarce, the experience of studying in the most important university in the world was no doubt a positive one, so much so that Pico often boasted of his skill at using the disputative

[8] For a detailed analysis and a recent interpretation of this exchange, see E. Barbaro and G. Pico della Mirandola, *Filosofia o eloquenza?* ed. Francesco Bausi (Naples: Liguori Editore, 1998). See also the studies by Letizia Panizza, "Ermolao Barbaro e Pico della Mirandola tra retorica e dialettica: Il *De genere dicendi philosophorum* del 1485," in *Una famiglia veneziana nella storia: I Barbaro: Atti del convegno di studi in occasione del quinto centenario della morte dell'umanista Ermolao, Venezia, 4–6 novembre 1993*, ed. Michela Marangoni and Manlio Pastore Strocchi (Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze Lettere ed Arti, 1996), 277–329, and "Pico della Mirandola e il *De genere dicendi philosophorum* del 1485: L'encomio paradossale dei 'barbari' e la loro parodia," *I Tatti Studies* 8 (1999): 69–10, and J.-C. Margolin, "Sur la conception humaniste du "Barbare": À propos de la controverse épistolaire entre Pic de la Mirandole et Ermolao Barbaro," in Marangoni and Strocchi, *Una famiglia veneziana nella storia*, 235–76.

[9] On this letter, see the important article by Francesco Bausi, "L'epistola di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola a Lorenzo de' Medici: Testo, traduzione e commento," *Interpres* 7 (1998): 7–57, where, in addition to publishing and annotating the letter, the author also convincingly proposes a new date, shifting it to 1486.

style of the "*celebratissimorum Parisiensium disputatorum.*"[10] It is not unreasonable to assume that it was in Paris that Pico came up with the idea of putting his own philosophical and theological positions as well as his political project to the test in a public debate, even though such an event would have differed from traditional university debates in terms of scope and significance.

V. 1486: An Extraordinary Year

Pico's reentry into Florence marked what could be called the most tormented period of his brief life. In fact, 1486 was an extraordinary year for the young scholar. Having just completed his studies in Paris, the twenty-three-year-old returned in March to Florence, where he stayed among his friends – Lorenzo de' Medici, Angelo Poliziano, Marsilio Ficino, and Girolamo Benivieni – until the eighth of May, when he left for Rome. Two days later he caused a major scandal in Arezzo when he attempted to abduct Margherita, wife of Giuliano di Mariotto de' Medici, from her home. Distressed by the experience, he retired to Perugia, whence he proceeded to Fratta on account of the plague. Here he finally succeeded in overcoming the bitterness and shame of the deplorable affair through work and penitence.

He wrote a commentary on a *canzone* written by his friend Girolamo Benivieni.[11] He collected 900 theses, or *Conclusiones*, meant to be discussed at a conference on philosophical peace that was to be held in Rome in January 1487, to which scholars would be invited at his expense. He also composed an *Oratio* as an introduction to the *Conclusiones*. By December 7, he was in Rome, where the *Conclusiones* were set in print. At this point, another scandal erupted: Pope Innocent VIII canceled the conference. The commission appointed to examine the theses condemned some of them. Pico defended himself in the *Apologia*, into which he incorporated large sections of the *Oratio*. By this time, however, the productive year of 1486 had drawn to a close.

Is there a connection to be made between the course of events that occurred from May to the autumn of 1486 and Pico's exceptional

[10] See Léon Dorez and Louis Thuasne, *Pic de la Mirandole en France (1485–1488)* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1897).

[11] Regarding the *Commento* and discoveries of texts related to it, see the study of Franco Bacchelli, *Giovanni Pico e Pier Leone da Spoleto: Tra filosofia dell'amore e tradizione cabalistica* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2001).

intellectual performance during this period?[12] As Pier Cesare Bori has noted, it is necessary to review the facts in greater detail, beginning with the "Arezzo incident." In 1486, Margherita was left a wealthy widow and was remarried to Giuliano di Mariotto de' Medici, a tax collector in Arezzo, where she came to live. According to a letter of May 12, 1486, written to Duke Ercole I by Aldobrandino Guidoni, an orator in the service of the Este in Florence, Pico had expressed the wish to go to Rome several days earlier and had proceeded to send his baggage to Perugia. Having departed with his large retinue, he had stopped in Arezzo and tried to abduct Margherita. According to Giuliano, the injured husband, she had been abducted against her will on the 10th of May. To his cousin Lorenzo de' Medici, Giuliano wrote that the Lord of Mirandola had arrived in Arezzo with his convoy the night before with the express intention of abducting Margherita. Giuliano likewise lamented the betrayal of his young dependent, who had stolen over 80 florins from him.

According to Aldobrandino Guidoni's version, on the contrary, the woman had escaped the walls of Arezzo voluntarily in order to follow the count, with whom she was in love. Another witness informed Lorenzo de' Medici that the woman had spontaneously and at her own volition mounted the horse which had carried her off. In a letter to fra' Girolamo di Piacenza, Giovanni Pico's sister, Costanza Bentivoglio, too, wrote that the lady had followed her brother voluntarily.

The accounts of subsequent events in various sources seem to concur. Filippo Carducci, captain and *podestà* of Arezzo, set the alarm to pursue the count by striking the city's bells; nearly two hundred of his men volunteered. The count was seized near Marciano, within the boundaries of Siena, and certain witnesses related that Pico lost eighteen men from his retinue and was lucky not to have died himself.

Back in Arezzo, it was arranged that Pico and his secretary, Cristoforo da Casalmaggiore, remain under surveillance while they waited for judgment to be passed. Shortly afterwards, however, the count was set free by his jailer, who received a hundred florins in compensation. Had this involved a different person, the Medici would have handled the insult to their family very differently. One gets a sense of Pico's privileged treatment in Lorenzo de' Medici's correspondence to the Signoria of Arezzo, in which he expressed his regret at the injustice done to Giuliano de' Medici without even naming the responsible party. Lorenzo's desire to

[12] Here and in the following points, I follow the interpretation proposed by Bori in *Pluralità delle vie*, 11–13.

pardon and protect his young friend was shared by Ercole I. Replying to Aldobrandino Guidoni, he lamented the turn of events because he "tenderly loved this magnificent Count Zohane," begged his orator to spare no effort to have him released as if he were their "brother," and finally pardoned him on the basis of biblical precedent.

As for Margherita, we merely know that she was handed back to her husband. Nevertheless, it seems from a comment by Flavius Mithridates – Pico's sole collaborator, who laced his translations of Cabalistic texts with poignant personal observations – that Margherita, possibly pregnant, could still have reached the count in Rome if she had cared to do so at the end of 1486 and the beginning of 1487. For Pico, however, much had changed in the months in between.

After a period of silence lasting until September of that year, a resumption in correspondence once again provides news of his activity. On September 8, 1486, Marsilio Ficino wrote to Pico, begging him to return his Arabic Koran.[13] Pico replied with a promise to go back to it shortly, as soon as he could return to Perugia, which he had left on account of the plague. He also discussed his linguistic studies with great enthusiasm. Having acquired a fair knowledge of Hebrew (adequate, he claimed, to have written a letter), he was making progress in Arabic and Chaldean. Pico claimed that such extraordinary things were not happening to him by chance; they were occasioned by divine will and by the favor of a divinity that assisted him benevolently in his studies. All this was the product of work, diligence, and the leap of his soul – and had occurred despite certain physical weaknesses. He was zealously reading the works of Chaldean sages, who helped clarify what the Hellenic tradition had presented in an incomplete and imperfect form.

Pico read Arabic authors such as Mohammed of Toledo and Abulgal, who had heard Averroës, as well as the questions of a certain Adelando, who had studied philosophy under Ammonius, Plotinus's teacher in Egypt. There were subjects that excited him, ones full of Pythagorean and ancient notions and esoteric disciplines. These convinced him to study the language in which they had been written so that he could have direct access to their texts. As for Plotinus (to whom Ficino apparently referred), Pico vowed that he had not abandoned him and would continue to study his works.

[13] See Angelo Michele Piemontese, "Il corano latino di Ficino e i corani arabi di Pico e di Monchates," in *Rinascimento* 36 (1996): 227–73.

In a long letter to Andrea Corneo, dated October 15, Pico discussed the events of the previous May. Rejecting his friend's advice to dedicate himself more to the active life, he defended the contemplative life, arguing that the practice of philosophy befitted a man of his class – a prince, not a paid professor. His friend would soon see the extraordinary, public, and even clamorous results of Pico's studies.[14]

VI. The *Conclusiones* and the Roman Condemnation of 1487

As noted, following his passionate and dramatic adventure, Pico resumed his studies with increased commitment. Elia del Medigo joined him in order to discuss Avicenna's and Averroës's theories on the One, on Being, and on Essence. Soon Flavius Mithridates arrived in their midst as well. Pico studied a multitude of Arabic, Jewish, and Hermetic texts at the sides of his two teachers. He immersed himself particularly in the study of the Cabala, perfecting his knowledge to the point that he became the first Latin scholar to make explicit mention of the actual Cabala. In effect, he has come to be considered the founder of the Christian Cabala. As Raymond Lull has pointed out, there was a pious, theosophical, and mystical approach to the Cabalistic tradition, which involved not only a philosopher's technical competence but also his internal commitment.

It is clear that Pico felt that he had much to offer to the Church of Rome and believed that his theorizing in no way ran counter to the principles of Christian theology. Fortified by these convictions and by the confidence of youth, Pico dedicated himself to the preparation of the Roman event.

By November 1486, the *Conclusiones* were ready. The text was published on the 7th of December in Rome at the press of Eucharius Silber. Pico, as stated above, invited theologians and philosophers for the days following the Epiphany of 1487. Nevertheless, his arrival in Rome was immediately complicated by voices of dissent, which convinced the Pope to suspend the debate. The papal brief, *Cum injunctio nobis*, of February 20, 1487, granted Giovanni Monisart, Bishop of Tournai, the task of organizing a commission of seven bishops (among whom was Pedro Garcia), two generals of religious orders, and eight theologians and canons. The commission convened from the second to the thirteenth of March 1487. Pico was present at the debate, but only until day 5. After that he was no longer invited to participate. Seven theses were immediately condemned, then

[14] Bori, *Pluralità delle vie*, 13–19.

another six. After a more thorough analysis, the first seven were condemned absolutely, while the other six were only censored. The records of the trial, kept by Johannes Cordier, a theologian from the Sorbonne, and the ailing Marco de Miroldo, were not favorably disposed to Pico.

Exasperated and convinced of the correctness of his own reasoning, Pico quickly drafted an apologia in which he treated and clarified the thirteen contested theses. Once again, the effect was not what he hoped for, and the Roman Curia viewed the publication of the *Apologia* on May 31, 1487, as an act of insubordination. In a brief dated June 6, Innocent VIII summoned the tribunal of the Inquisition, and on July 31, Giovanni signed an act of submission that granted permission for the copies of the *Conclusiones* to be burnt at the stake, but the bull *Et si injuncto nobis*, dated August 4, absolved him personally of all condemnation. It is interesting that the bull was publicized only on December 15, together with the mandate for his arrest. Pico saw no alternative but to flee Rome. He was arrested at the beginning of 1488 between Grenoble and Lyon, whence he was escorted to Paris under the supervision of papal nuncios. All the same, he was protected by the king, who locked him up in the castle of Vincennes so that he would not be left in the hands of the Vatican. In the end, Pico was able to leave France unharmed, thanks to a special royal permit. He returned to Florence in April of the same year.[15]

VII. Final Years

The *Oratio* and the *Apologia* were composed only a few months apart: the first in November 1486, shortly before Pico's arrival in Rome, the second in the spring of 1487, after the Roman censure. Only the *Apologia* was published, with a dedication to Lorenzo de' Medici. In it appeared lengthy passages literally drawn from the *Oratio* – so much so that in his *argumentum* introducing the *Oratio* in the edition of his uncle's works published in 1496, Gianfrancesco alerted the reader to the rapport between the two texts. Both the *Oratio* and, to a greater measure, the *Apologia* reflected the events of Rome and the climate of suspicion that surrounded Pico on the

[15] Aside from the contribution of Albano Biondi listed in n. 5, see Louis Valcke, "La condamnation de Jean Pic de la Mirandole: Réévalutation des enjeux," in *Le contrôle des idées a la Renaissance*, ed. Jesus Martinez de Bujanda (Geneva: Libraire Droz, 1996), 49–74 and *Une controverse sur Origène a la Renaissance: Jean Pic de la Mirandole et Pierre Garcia*, ed. Henry Crouzel S. J. (Paris: Libraire Philosophique J. Vrin, 1977). A detailed analysis of the "disputa Romana" is presented in Giovanni Di Napoli, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola e la problematica dottrinale del suo tempo* (Roma: Desclée & Co., 1965), 81–94.

eve of the dispute that never took place. As Eugenio Garin demonstrated when he published a manuscript copy of the *Oratio* (Palatino 885) – the only one known to this day – the work as it has come down to us was composed in two stages, with significant additions being made at the same time as the *Conclusiones* were being prepared.[16]

With his return to Florence, Pico entered an extremely productive period that would result in the publication of the *Heptaplus* and *De ente et uno* as well as the composition of the *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem* and the great moral letters to his nephew Gianfrancesco. Most likely this new impetus in his studies was motivated by his need to overcome the bitter vicissitudes of Rome and perhaps also by his desire for spiritual redemption. Both in a letter to Andrea Corneo of 1489 and in the preface to the *Heptaplus*, he announced that he was working on a systematic commentary of the Psalms, which, however, he never carried to completion. The *Heptaplus* came out in print in the summer of 1489 and was financed by Roberto Salviati. The idea behind this work is that "the seven days of creation" contain all of nature's secrets and that in his books Moses had revealed all of human wisdom and all that the spirit of God had told him. The arguments of those who dismissed the value of the book of Moses as if it were something crude and trivial were invalid, since these men failed to consider the fact that all the great wise men, including Christ, had frequently masked their wisdom, revealing themselves only through a "veiled" countenance.[17] Pico's goal in this work was to interpret the creation of the whole world without the help of any previous commentaries – and not in a single sense but on seven levels – without ever losing the thread of his argument and without attributing to Moses ideas that conflicted with the truth that had been recovered by the best philosophers and accepted even by Christians.

In this same period, he also conceived and wrote *De ente et uno*, which circulated in Florence in manuscript form. This work was dedicated by Pico to his friend Poliziano, who had insistently asked him to intervene in

[16] Eugenio Garin, "La prima redazione dell' 'oratio de hominis dignitate'," in *La cultura filosofica del Rinascimento italiano* (Florence: Sansoni Editore, 1961), 233–40. Nevertheless, one can now not omit the edition by Saverio Marchignoli in Bori, *Pluralità delle vie*, 95–158, or that edited by Francesco Bausi: G. Pico della Mirandola, *Discorso sulla dignità dell'uomo* (Parma: Fondazione Pietro Bembo – Ugo Guanda Editore, 2003).

[17] For a study exclusively on the *Heptaplus* and related themes, see Charles Trinkaus, "L'Heptaplus di Pico della Mirandola: Compendio tematico e concordanza del suo pensiero," *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Convegno internazionale di Studi nel Cinquecentesimo Anniversario della Morte (1494–1994)*, 105–25, and Crofton Black's very recent volume, *Pico's* Heptaplus *and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

a dispute between the Platonists – in the persons of Lorenzo de' Medici and Marsilio Ficino – and the Peripatetics or those who, like Poliziano, had always studied the texts of Aristotle. In reality, Pico seemed to disagree with the very principles of the debate and used the invitation as an occasion to articulate his theories on concord in public. To set Plato against Aristotle had been one of the most arduous intellectual tasks for a long time, so much so that the ideology of humanism had come up with two diverse cultural strategies for dealing with, and certainly two different models of understanding, the two philosophers. Pico did not succeed in bringing the enterprise to a conclusion, but in *De ente et uno* he left a very interesting model of how he would have proceeded.

The question confronted in *De ente et uno* was not a new one for Pico, who had discussed it already with Elia del Medigo, among others. If the actual thesis of *De ente et uno* contained nothing new, certainly new was his reevaluation of the *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, and *Philebus* and Simplicius's commentaries on Aristotle. His sophisticated project to read Plato not only through Plotinus and Proclus but also through Aristotle and medieval theologians also remained unpublished.[18]

Before passing on to Pico's final works, it is worth mentioning the two important moral letters written by him to his nephew Gianfrancesco, the first from Ferrara, dated May 15, 1492, the second written on July 2, which was followed by a third on November 27. In these letters, Pico laid out the balance of existence itself and attempted to summarize all its precepts: it was not the world that was the adversary here, but those things in it, such as ignorance, insanity, and greed, that needlessly wore out man's soul. One had to know how to liberate oneself from these afflictions. This essentially was his advice to his nephew.

In the final years of his life, Pico seems to have directed his intellectual energy towards theological and spiritual studies, the mystery of life and grace, and the figure of the cross. He followed the sermons of Savonarola, to whose coming to Florence he himself had contributed. Pico's final work was conceived in the silence and solitude of his villa in Fiesole. This was the unfinished *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*, the most comprehensive of all his projects. Published posthumously by his nephew Gianfrancesco in the 1496 edition of Pico's works, the *Disputationes* did not fail to rouse interest and stimulate much discussion. The subject was at

[18] On the *De ente et uno* one should consult the work by Stéphane Toussaint: *L'esprit du Quattrocento. Pic de la Mirandole: Le* De Ente et Uno *et* Réponses à Antonio Cittadini (Paris: H. Champion, 1995).

the center of the period's cultural debates: Savonarola immediately prepared a compendium in Italian, Giovanni Mainardi and Agrippa praised it, while others, such as Pontano, Luca Bellanti, Girolamo Torrella, Pomponazzi, and Bodin, criticized it in various ways, sometimes severely.

The *Disputationes* appeared just as interest in astrology was being reawakened. In this work, Pico first reviewed all that had been written on the subject. In the first book, he took a stand against astrology as a form of divination or aid to judgment and distinguished it from astronomy, which was more mathematical, hence scientific. In the second book, he tried to demonstrate the uselessness and deception of astrology and referred to concrete examples of the ignorance of astrologers, whose predictions never came to pass except by accident. In the third book, Pico confronted the problem fully and examined the bases of astrological science. If the properties of heaven were motion and light, if heaven was a universal cause, that is, remote, how could one derive from it – as if from a secondary cause – the events of the world?

The book closes with a well-known page in which Pico demonstrates that the traits of a man such as Aristotle that are produced by nature are determined by secondary causes and not the stars, while his genius is the product of the free and infinite self-creation of the human spirit.[19]

Giovanni Pico died in Florence on November 17, 1494, with Girolamo Savonarola at his side.[20] By this point, his estate had been granted to charitable institutions and his nephews, his well stocked library to his brother Anton Maria. On the same day, Charles VIII entered Florence.[21]

[19] The modern edition of the *Disputationes*, edited by Eugenio Garin in two volumes (Florence: Vallecchi, 1946–1952) has been updated with a list of corrections by Franco Bacchelli as part of a three volume reprinting of Pico's work: G. Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno, Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem* (Turin: Nino Aragno Editore, 2004).

[20] On the not very convincing hypothesis advanced on Pico's death by poison and the role played by Cristoforo da Casalmaggiore, see Léon Dorez, "La mort de Pic de la Mirandole et l'édition Aldine des oeuvres d'Ange Politien (1494–1498)," *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 32 (1898): 360–4 and "Encore la mort de Jean Pic de la Mirandole," *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 33 (1899): 180, and S. A. Farmer, *Syncretism*, 177–8.

[21] I thank Irina Oryshkevich for the translation of my contribution to this volume and Arthur M. Lesley and Gian Carlo Garfagnini for their invaluable support.

Index