

**On The Dignity of Man** 



A SPEECH BY  
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Most venerable fathers, I have read in the records of the Arabians that Abdul the Saracen, on being asked what thing on, so to speak, the world's stage, he viewed as most greatly worthy of wonder, answered that he viewed nothing more wonderful than man. And Mercury's, "a great wonder, Asclepius, is man!" agrees with that opinion.<sup>1</sup> On thinking over the reason for these sayings, I was not satisfied by the many assertions made by many men concerning the outstandingness of human nature: that man is the messenger between creatures, familiar with the upper and king of the lower; by the shrewdness of the senses, by the hunting-power of reason, and by the light of intelligence, the interpreter of nature; the part in between the standstill of eternity and the flow of time; and, as the Persians say, the bond tying the world together, nay, the nuptial bond; and, according to David, "a little lower than the angels."<sup>2</sup> These reasons are great but not the chief ones, that is, they are not reasons for a lawful claim to the highest wonder as to a prerogative. Why should we not wonder more at the angels themselves and at the very blessed heavenly choirs?

Finally, it seemed to me that I understood why man is the animal that is most happy, and is therefore worthy of all wonder; and lastly, what the state is that is allotted to man in the succession of things, and that is capable of arousing envy not only in the brutes but also in the stars and even in minds beyond the world. It is wonderful and beyond belief. For this is the reason why man is rightly said and thought to be a great

<sup>1</sup> *Asclepius* I. 6 (*Hermetica*, ed. W. Scott, I, 294).

<sup>2</sup> Psalms 8:5.

marvel and the animal really worthy of wonder. Now hear what it is, fathers; and with kindly ears and for the sake of your humanity, give me your close attention:

Now the highest Father, God the master-builder, had, by the laws of his secret wisdom, fabricated this house, this world which we see, a very superb temple of divinity. He had adorned the super-celestial region with minds. He had animated the celestial globes with eternal souls; he had filled with a diverse throng of animals the cast-off and residual parts of the lower world. But, with the work finished, the Artisan desired that there be someone to reckon up the reason of such a big work, to love its beauty, and to wonder at its greatness. Accordingly, now that all things had been completed, as Moses and Timaeus testify, He lastly considered creating man.<sup>3</sup> But there was nothing in the archetypes from which He could mold a new sprout, nor anything in His storehouses which He could bestow as a heritage upon a new son, nor was there an empty judiciary seat where this contemplator of the universe could sit. Everything was filled up; all things had been laid out in the highest, the lowest, and the middle orders. But it did not belong to the paternal power to have failed in the final parturition, as though exhausted by childbearing; it did not belong to wisdom, in a case of necessity, to have been tossed back and forth through want of a plan; it did not belong to the loving-kindness which was going to praise divine liberality in others to be forced to condemn itself. Finally, the best of workmen decided that that to which nothing of its very own could be given should be, in composite fashion, whatsoever had belonged individually to each and every thing. Therefore He took up man, a work of indeterminate form; and, placing him at the midpoint of the world, He spoke to him as follows:

"We have given to thee, Adam, no fixed seat, no form of thy very own, no gift peculiarly thine, that thou mayest feel as thine own, have as thine own, possess as thine own the seat, the form, the gifts which thou thyself shalt desire. A limited nature in other creatures is confined within the laws written down by

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Timaeus* 41b ff.

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 the higher natures which are divine."

O great liberality of God the Father! O great and wonderful happiness of man! It is given him to have that which he chooses and to be that which he wills. As soon as brutes are born, they bring with them, "from their dam's bag," as Lucilius says, what they are going to possess.<sup>4</sup> Highest spirits have been, either from the beginning or soon after, that which they are going to be throughout everlasting eternity. At man's birth the Father placed in him every sort of seed and sprouts of every kind of life. The seeds that each man cultivates will grow and bear their fruit in him. If he cultivates vegetable seeds, he will become a plant. If the seeds of sensation, he will grow into brute. If rational, he will come out a heavenly animal. If intellectual, he will be an angel, and a son of God. And if he is not contented with the lot of any creature but takes himself up into the center of his own unity, then, made one spirit with God and settled in the solitary darkness of the Father, who is above all things, he will stand ahead of all things. Who does not wonder at this chameleon which we are? Or who at all feels more wonder at anything else whatsoever? It was not unfittingly that Asclepius the Athenian said that man was symbolized by Prometheus in the secret rites, by reason of our nature sloughing its skin and transforming itself; hence metamorphoses were popular among the Jews and the Pythagoreans. For the more secret Hebrew

<sup>4</sup> Lucilius, *Satyrarum* VI (22), in Nonius Marcellus, *De compendiosa doctrina* II (Lindsay, I, 109).

theology at one time reshapes holy Enoch into an angel of divinity, whom they call *malach hashechina*, and at other times reshapes other men into other divinities.<sup>5</sup> According to the Pythagoreans, wicked men are deformed into brutes and, if you believe Empedocles, into plants too.<sup>6</sup> And copying them, Mau-meth [Mohammed] often had it on his lips that he who draws back from divine law becomes a brute. And his saying so was reasonable: for it is not the rind which makes the plant, but a dull and non-sentient nature; not the hide which makes a beast of burden, but a brutal and sensual soul; not the spherical body which makes the heavens, but right reason; and not a separateness from the body but a spiritual intelligence which makes an angel. For example, if 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.

Who is there that does not wonder at man? And it is not unreasonable that in the Mosaic and Christian holy writ man is sometimes denoted by the name "all flesh" and at other times by that of "every creature"; and man fashions, fabricates, transforms himself into the shape of all flesh, into the character of every creature.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, where Evantes the Persian tells of the Chaldaean theology, he writes that man is not any inborn image of himself, but many images coming in from the outside: hence that saying of the Chaldaeans: *enosh hu shinuy vekamah tevaoth baal chayim*, that is, man is an animal of diverse, multiform, and destructible nature.

<sup>5</sup> Book of Enoch 40:8.

<sup>6</sup> Empedocles, fr. 117 (Diels).

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 6:12; Numbers 27:16; Mark 16:15.

But why all this? In order for us to understand that, after having been born in this state so that we may be what we will to be, then, since we are held in honor, we ought to take particular care that no one may say against us that we do not know that we are made similar to brutes and mindless beasts of burden.<sup>8</sup> But rather, as Asaph the prophet says: "Ye are all gods, and sons of the most high," unless by abusing the very indulgent liberality of the Father, we make the free choice, which he gave to us, harmful to ourselves instead of helpful toward salvation.<sup>9</sup> Let a certain holy ambition invade the mind, so that we may not be content with mean things but may aspire to the highest things and strive with all our forces to attain them: for if we will to, we can. Let us spurn earthly things; let us struggle toward the heavenly. Let us put in last place whatever is of the world; and let us fly beyond the chambers of the world to the chamber nearest the most lofty divinity. There, as the sacred mysteries reveal, the seraphim, cherubim, and thrones occupy the first places. Ignorant of how to yield to them and unable to endure the second places, let us compete with the angels in dignity and glory. When we have willed it, we shall be not at all below them.

But by what method? or by doing what? Let us see what they are doing, what life they are living. If we too live that life—for we can—we shall equal their lot. 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 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. Upon the throne, that is, upon the just judge, sits God, the judge of the

<sup>8</sup> Psalms 48:21 (King James version, Psalms 49:20).

<sup>9</sup> Psalms 81:6 (King James, 82:6), cf. John 10:34.

ages. He flies above the cherub, that is, the contemplator, and warms him, as if by brooding over him. The Spirit of the Lord is borne above the waters—I mean those waters which are above the heavens, the waters which in Job praise the Lord with hymns before daybreak.<sup>10</sup> He who is a seraph, that is, a lover, is in God; and more, God is in him, and God and he are one.

But in what way can anyone either judge or love things which are unknown? Moses loved God whom he saw, and as judge, he administered to the people what he formerly saw as contemplator on the mountain. Therefore with his own light the cherub in the middle makes us ready for the seraphic fire, and at the same time illuminates us for the judgment of the thrones. He is the bond of the first minds, the order of Pallas, the ruler over contemplative philosophy.<sup>11</sup> We must first rival him and embrace him and lay hold of him. Let us make ourselves one with him and be caught up to the heights of love. And let us descend to the duties of action, well instructed and prepared.

But if our life is to be shaped after the model of a cherub's life, it is well worth while to have in readiness and before our eyes what that life is and what sort it is, what actions and what works are theirs. Since we may not attain to this through ourselves, because we are flesh and our wisdom is of the earth, let us go to the ancient fathers who can give us a very substantial and sure faith in these things as things familiar and akin to them.<sup>12</sup> Let us consult the Apostle Paul, the vessel of election, because, when he was lifted up to the third heaven, he saw the armies of the cherubim in action. According to Dionysius' interpretation, he will answer that the cherubim are being purged, then are being illuminated, and lastly are being perfected.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Compare Job 38:7, and Genesis 1:2.

<sup>11</sup> Macrobius, *In Somnium Scipionis* I. 6. 11, 54-55.

<sup>12</sup> Romans 8:5.

<sup>13</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, the Areopagite, *Caelestis hierarchia* VI-VII. The writings attributed to the unknown Dionysius, probably of the late 5th century A.D., contain a blend of Christian, Greek, and Jewish elements; they had an enormous influence on subsequent Christian theology.

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.

And lest our Christians be insufficient for us, let us consult the patriarch Jacob, whose image flashes forth, carven in the seat of glory. That very wise father will give us advice by showing himself asleep in the lower world and awake in the upper. But his advice will be given figuratively; that is the way all things happen there. A ladder stretching from the lowness of earth to the heights of heaven and divided by the succession of many steps, with the Lord sitting at the top: the angels, contemplating, climb, by turns, up and down the steps.<sup>14</sup> But if we who are in pursuit of an angelic life must try to do this same thing, I ask, who can touch the ladder of the Lord with dirty feet or unwashed hands? As the mysteries put it, it is sacrilegious for the impure to touch that which is pure. But what are these feet, and what are these hands? Naturally, the feet of the soul are that most despicable portion which alone rests upon matter as upon the earth, I mean the nutritive and the food-taking power, kindling-wood of lust and teacher of voluptuous softness. As for the hands of the soul, we might as well have spoken of anger, which struggles as a defender for appetite and, like a robber under the dust and sunshine, carries off the things which will be squandered by the appetite, which is dozing away in the shade. But, so as not to be hurled back from the ladder as profane and unclean, let us wash these hands and these feet in moral philosophy as in living water—that is, the whole sensual part wherein the allurement of the body resides,

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 28:12-13.

the allurement from which, they say, the soul gets a twisted neck, while being held back.<sup>15</sup> But, if we want to be the companions of the angels moving up and down Jacob's ladder, this will not be enough, unless we have first been well trained and well taught to move forward duly from rung to rung, never to turn aside from the main direction of the ladder, and to make sallies up and down. When we have attained that by means of the speaking or reasoning art, then, besouled by a cherub's spirit, philosophizing along the rungs of the ladder of nature, and penetrating through everything from center to center, we shall at one time be descending, tearing apart, like Osiris, the one into many by a titanic force; and we shall at another time be ascending and gathering into one the many, like the members of Osiris,<sup>16</sup> by an Apollonian force; until finally we come to rest in the bosom of the Father, who is at the top of the ladder, and are consumed by a theological happiness.

Let us inquire too of Job the just, what covenant he entered into with the God of life before he was begotten into life, the covenant which, among those million who stand before him, the highest God most strongly desired.<sup>17</sup> He will doubtlessly answer, Peace. Accordingly, since we read in Job that God makes peace in the highest,<sup>18</sup> and that the middle order interprets the prophecies of the highest order to the lower orders—let Empedocles the philosopher interpret for us the words of Job the theologian: he signifies to us that two natures are planted in our souls; by the one nature we are lifted upward to the heavens, and by the other, shoved downward to the lower world; and this by strife and friendship or by war and peace, according to his songs, in which he complains that, driven by strife and discord like a madman and banished from the gods, he is tossed upon the deep.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, fathers, there is multiple dis-

<sup>15</sup> *Asclepius I. 12.*

<sup>16</sup> Osiris, Egyptian god, was cut to pieces by Seth, and put together again by his wife, Isis.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel 7:10; cf. Jeremiah 1:5.

<sup>18</sup> Job 25:2.

<sup>19</sup> Empedocles, fr. 115 (Diels).

cord in us, and we have severe, intestine, and more than civil wars at home: if we are unwilling to have these wars, if we will strive for that peace which so lifts us up to the heights that we are made to stand among the exalted of the Lord, moral philosophy alone will still those wars in us, will bring calm successfully.<sup>20</sup> First, if our man will seek a truce with the enemy, he will subdue the uncurbed forays of the multiple brute, the quarrelings of the lion, and the feelings of wrath. Then if we take the right counsel, and desire for ourselves the security of everlasting peace, it will come and will fulfill our prayers liberally. The slaying of both beasts, like stuck sows, will establish most solemnly a most holy treaty between the flesh and the spirit. Dialectic will calm the turmoils of a reason shoved about between the fistfights of oratory and the deceits of the syllogism. Natural philosophy will calm the strifes and discords of opinion, which shake the unquiet soul up and down, pull her apart, and mangle her. But natural philosophy will bring calm in such a way as to command us to remember that, according to Heraclitus, our nature is born of war, and therefore is called a struggle by Homer; and hence, that in natural philosophy true quiet and lasting peace cannot offer themselves to us, and that this is the office and prerogative of their mistress, most holy theology.<sup>21</sup> Theology herself will show the way to that peace and be our companion and guide; and, as from afar she sees us hurrying, she will cry out, "Come unto me, ye that labor, and I will refresh you. Come unto me, and I will give unto you peace which the world and nature cannot give unto you!"<sup>22</sup> As we are called so sweetly and are invited with such kindness, let us fly on winged feet like earthly Mercuries into the embrace of our most blessed mother and enjoy the longed-for peace: the most holy peace, the indivisible bond, the friendship which is one soul, the friendship whereby all minds do not merely accord in one intellect that is above every intellect but in some inexpressible fashion become absolutely one. This is that friendship

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Lucan, *Pharsalia* I. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Heraclitus, fr. 53 (Walzer).

<sup>22</sup> Matthew 11:28; John 14:27.

which the Pythagoreans say is the end of all philosophy. This is that peace which God makes on his heights and which the angels descending to earth announced to men of good will, that by this peace the men themselves ascending into heaven might become angels.<sup>23</sup> Let us desire this peace for our friends, for our age. Let us desire this peace for every house into which we enter. Let us desire it for our soul, that through this peace she may become the house of God; that after she has, through morals and dialectics, cast off her meanness and has adorned herself with manifold philosophy as with a princely garment, and has crowned with garlands of theology the summits of the gates, the King of Glory may descend, and, coming with the Father, may make his residence in her. If she shows herself worthy of such a great guest, as his mercy is great, then, in a golden gown as in a wedding dress, wrapped in a multiple variety of teachings, she will welcome her beautiful guest not as a guest but as a bridegroom. That she may never be divorced from him, she will long to be divorced from her own people and, forgetful of the house of her father, nay, forgetful of herself, she will long to die in herself that she may live in her bridegroom, in whose sight the death of his saints is surely precious—I mean death, if that should be called death which is the fullness of life, the meditation upon which the wise have said is the study of philosophy.<sup>24</sup>

Let us also cite Moses himself, scarcely inferior to the fountain fullness of holy and inexpressible intelligence, whence the angels are drunken on their own nectar. We shall hear the venerable judge promulgating laws to us who dwell in the desert solitude of this body: "Let those who are still unclean and in need of moral knowledge dwell with the people outside of the tabernacle in the open sky, and let them meanwhile purify themselves like Thessalian priests. Let those who have by now set their lives (*mores*) in order be received into the sanctuary. But let them not yet handle the sacred things; but first, as deacons assiduous in the service that is dialectic, let them

<sup>23</sup> Jamblichus, *Vita Pythagoras* 230-233; Luke 2:14.

<sup>24</sup> Plato, *Phaedo* 81.

minister to the sacred things of philosophy. Then, after they have been admitted to the sacred things, let them in the priesthood of philosophy contemplate sometimes the many-colored, that is, the star-constellated royal decoration of the higher palace of God, at other times the celestial candelabra divided by seven lights, and at other times the skin-covered elements, that finally they may be received through the merits of sublime theology into the sanctuary of the temple and may enjoy the glory of divinity without the veil of any image coming in between."<sup>25</sup> Moses gives us these direct 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.

But in truth, not only the Mosaic or Christian mysteries but also the theology of the ancients show the advantages for us and the dignity of these liberal arts about which I have come here to dispute. For what else is meant by the degrees of initiation that are customary in the secret rites of the Greeks? First, to those who had been purified by moral and dialectic arts, which we have called, as it were, purgative, befell the reception of the mysteries. And what else can this reception be but the interpretation of more hidden nature by means of philosophy? Then lastly, to those who had been thus prepared, came that *εποντρεῖα*, that is, a vision of divine things by means of the light of theology. Who does not seek to be initiated into such rites? Who does not set all human things at a lower value and, contemning the goods of fortune and neglecting the body, does not desire, while still continuing on earth, to become the drinking-companion of the gods; and, drunken with the nectar of eternity, to bestow the gift of immortality upon the mortal animal? Who does not wish to have breathed into him the Socratic frenzies sung by Plato in the *Phaedrus*, that by the oarlike movement of wings and feet he may quickly escape from here, that is, from this world where he is laid down as in an evil place, and be carried in speediest flight to the heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> We shall be possessed, fathers, we shall be possessed by these Socratic

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Exodus 25-26.

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* 244 ff.

frenzies, which will so place us outside of our minds that they will place our mind and ourselves in God. We shall be possessed by them if we have first done what is in us to do. For if through morality the forces of the passions will have been so stretched to the [proper] measure, through due proportions, that they sound together in fixed concord, and if through dialectic, reason will have moved, keeping time in her forward march, then, aroused by the frenzy of the muses, we shall drink in the heavenly harmony of our ears. Then Bacchus the leader of the muses, in his own mysteries, that is, in the visible signs of nature, will show the invisible things of God to us as we philosophize, and will make us drunk with the abundance of the house of God. In this house, if we are faithful like Moses, holiest theology will approach, and will inspire us with a twofold frenzy. We, raised up into the loftiest watchtower of theology, from which, measuring with indivisible eternity the things that are, will be, and shall have been, and looking at their primeval beauty, shall be prophets of Phoebus, his winged lovers, and finally, aroused with ineffable charity as with fire, placed outside of ourselves like burning Seraphim, filled with divinity, we shall now not be ourselves, but He himself who made us.

The sacred names of Apollo, if anyone examines their meanings and hidden mysteries, will sufficiently show that that god is no less philosopher than prophet. Since Ammonius has followed this up sufficiently,<sup>2</sup> there is no reason why I should handle it in another way. But there come to mind, fathers, three Delphic precepts, very necessary for those who are to enter into the sacrosanct and very august temple of the true, not the invented Apollo, who illuminates every soul coming into this world. You will see that they give us no other advice than to embrace with all our strength this three-fold philosophy which the present disputation is about. For that *μηδὲν ἄγαν*, that is, nothing too much, rightly prescribes the measure and rule of all virtues through the principle of moderation, with which morals is concerned. Then that *γνῶθι σεαυτόν*, that is, know thyself, arouses us and urges us towards the knowledge of all nature, of

<sup>2</sup> Plutarch, *De El Delphico* 2, 385b, in *Moralia*.

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*.<sup>3</sup> At last, illuminated by this knowledge through natural philosophy, now near to God, saying *εἰ*, that is, Thou art, we shall address the true Apollo with a theological greeting, familiarly and so happily.

Let us also consult the very wise Pythagoras, who was wise especially in that he never thought himself worthy of the name of wise. First, he will warn us not to sit too much, that is, not to let go the rational part, by which the soul measures, judges, and examines everything, and relax in idle inactivity. But let us direct it diligently and arouse it by dialectical exercise and rule. Then he will signify that we are to pay special attention to two things, not to make water against the sun nor trim our nails during the sacrifices. But after we have, through morals, relieved ourselves of the appetite for overflowing sensual pleasures and, as it were, trimmed the tips of our nails, the sharp pricks of anger and the stings of animosity, only then may we begin to take part in the aforementioned sacred mysteries of Bacchus, and to be at leisure for our contemplation, whose father and leader is rightly said to be the Sun. At last, he will advise us to feed the cock, that is, to nourish the divine part of our soul with knowledge of divine things as with solid food and heavenly ambrosia.<sup>4</sup> This is the cock at the sight of which the lion, that is, every earthly power, feels fear and awe. This is that cock to which intelligence was given, as we read in Job.<sup>5</sup> At the crowing of this cock, erring man returns to his senses. In the morning dawn this cock daily crows in harmony with the morning stars praising God. Socrates at the point of death, when he hoped to unite the divinity of his soul to the divinity of a greater world, said that he owed this cock to Asclepius, that is, to the physician of souls, now that he was placed beyond all danger of sickness.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Alcibiades I*, 132c.

<sup>4</sup> Porphyry, *Vita Pythagoras* 42; Jamblichus, *Protrepticus* 21.

<sup>5</sup> Job 38:36.

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Phaedo* 118a. Asclepius, or Aesculapius, the god of medicine.

Let us also examine the records of the Chaldaeans. We shall see, if we can believe them, that through these same arts, the way to happiness is opened to men. The Chaldaean interpreters write that it was a saying of Zoroaster that the soul has wings; when the feathers fall off, she is borne headlong into the body, when they sprout again, she flies up to the heights.<sup>7</sup> When his students asked him how they might obtain souls flying with well feathered wings, he said "You moisten the wings with the waters of life." When they again questioned him where they might seek these waters, he answered them figuratively (as was the custom of the man), "The paradise of God is washed and watered by four rivers. From the same place you may draw healthful waters for yourselves. The name of the river from the north is Pischon, which means straight, that from the west is Dichon, which signifies atonement, that from the east is Chid-dekel, which means light, that from the south is Perath, which we can translate as piety."<sup>8</sup> Give close attention, fathers, and consider 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 may, like the eagles of heaven, endure bravely the very radiant brightness of the midday sun. These are perhaps those morning, noon, and evening knowledges sung first by David and explained more fully by Augustine.<sup>9</sup> This is that midday light, which, perpendicular, inflames the Seraphim, and at the same time illuminates the Cherubim. This is that land toward which old father Abraham was always setting out. This is that place where there is no room for un-

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Psellus and Pletho, *In Oracula Chaldaica* (Amsterdam, 1688), pp. 81 and 91.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Genesis 2:10-14.

<sup>9</sup> Psalms 54:18 (King James, 55:17). Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* IV. 29-30.

clean spirits, as the doctrines of the Cabalists and Moors teach. And if it is right to make public, even enigmatically, something from more hidden mysteries, after the sudden fall of man from heaven has condemned our heads to dizziness, and, according to Jeremiah, death has entered through the windows and stricken liver and breast, let us call Raphael the heavenly physician to free us by morals and dialectic as by saving medicines.<sup>10</sup> When we are restored to good health, Gabriel, the strength of God, will now dwell in us. Leading us through the wonders of nature, and pointing out the virtue and power of God everywhere, he will finally hand us over to the high priest Michael, who will distinguish the veterans in the service of philosophy with the priesthood of theology, as with a crown of precious stones.

These are the reasons, most reverend fathers, that have not merely inspired me but compelled me to the study of philosophy. I was certainly not going to state them, except as a reply to those accustomed to condemning the study of philosophy in princes especially, or more generally, in men of ordinary fortune. Already (and this is the misfortune of our age) all this philosophizing makes for contempt and contumely rather than for honor and glory. This destructive and monstrous opinion that no one, or few, should philosophize, has much invaded the minds of almost everybody. As if it were absolutely nothing to have the causes of things, the ways of nature, the reason of the universe, the counsels of God, the mysteries of heaven and earth very certain before our eyes and hands, unless someone could derive some benefit from it or acquire profit for himself. It has already reached the point that now (what sorrow!) those only are considered wise who pursue the study of wisdom for the sake of money; so that one may see chaste Pallas, who stays among men by a gift of the gods, chased out, hooted, hissed; who loves and befriends her does not have her unless she, as it were prostituting herself and receiving a pittance for her deflowered virginity, bring back the ill-bought money to her lover's money-box. I say all these things not without great grief and indignation, not against the princes, but against the phil-

<sup>10</sup> Jeremiah 9:21.

osophers of this age, who believe and preach that there should be no philosophizing because there is no money for philosophers, no prizes awarded them; as if they did not show by this one word that they are not philosophers. Since their whole life is set on money-making or ambition, they do not embrace the knowledge of truth for itself. I shall give myself this credit and shall not blush to praise myself in this respect, that I have never philosophized for any reason other than for the sake of philosophizing, that I have neither hoped nor sought from my studies, from my lucubrations, any other gain or profit than cultivation of soul and knowledge of truth, always so greatly desired by me. I have always been so desirous of this truth and so much in love with it that, abandoning all care of public and private affairs, I gave my whole self over to the leisure of contemplating, from which no disparaging of the envious, no curses from the enemies of wisdom, have been able so far or will be able later to frighten me away. Philosophy herself has taught me to weigh things rather by my own conscience than by the judgments of others, and to consider not so much whether I should be badly spoken of as whether I myself should say or do anything bad. In fact, I was not ignorant, most reverend fathers, that this disputation of mine will be as pleasant and enjoyable to all you who delight in good arts and have wished to honor it with your most august presence, as it will be heavy and burdensome to many others; and I know that there are some who have condemned my undertaking before this, and who condemn it now under many names. Thus there are usually no fewer, not to say more, growlers who carry on well and in a holy way against virtue, than there are who do so wickedly and wrongly against vice.

There are some who do not approve of this whole class of disputes and this practice of debating in public about letters, asserting that it makes rather for the display of talent and learning than for acquiring knowledge. There are some who do not disapprove of this type of exercise, but who do not approve of it at all in my case, because I at my age, in only my twenty-fourth year, have dared, in the most famous city, in the largest

assembly of the most learned men, in the apostolic senate, to propose a disputation on the sublime mysteries of Christian theology, on the loftiest questions of philosophy, on unknown teachings. Others who give me leave to dispute are unwilling to give me leave to dispute about nine hundred questions, saying in slander that the proposal was made as needlessly and ambitiously as it was beyond my powers. I should have immediately surrendered to their objections if the philosophy which I profess had so taught me; and now, at her teaching me, I would not answer if I believed this disputation among us were set up for brawling and quarreling. Consequently, let every intent of detraction and irritation depart, and let malice, which, Plato writes, is always absent from the divine chorus, also depart from our minds.<sup>11</sup> And let us learn in friendly fashion whether I ought to dispute, and on so many questions.

First, to those who slander this practice of disputing publicly, I am not going to say much, except that this crime, if they judge it a crime, is the joint work not only of all you very excellent doctors—who have often discharged this office not without very great praise and glory—but also of Plato and Aristotle and the most upright philosophers of every age, together with me. To them it was most certain that they had nothing better for reaching the knowledge of the truth which they sought than that they be very often in the exercise of disputing. As through gymnastics the forces of the body are strengthened, so doubtless in this, as it were, literary gymnasium, the forces of the soul become much stronger and more vigorous. I would not believe that the poets signified anything else to us by the celebrated arms of Pallas, or the Hebrews when they say *barzel*, iron, is the symbol of wise men, than that this sort of contest is very honorable, exceedingly necessary for gaining wisdom. Perhaps that is why the Chaldaeans, too, desire that at the birth of him who is to become a philosopher, Mars should behold Mercury with triangular aspect, as if to say that if you take away these encounters, these wars, then all philosophy will become drowsy and sleepy.

<sup>11</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* 247a. Cf. *Timaeus* 29e.

But to those who say that I am not equal to this business, the reason in my defense is more difficult. For if I say that I am equal to it, perhaps I shall seem liable to the charge of boastfulness and self-conceit; if I confess myself unequal, of audacity and imprudence. You see what difficulties I have fallen into, in what a position I am, where I cannot without blame make a promise about myself which I cannot then without blame fail to fulfill. Perhaps I could bring forward that saying of Job, that the spirit is in all,<sup>12</sup> and hear with Timothy, "Let no one scorn your young manhood."<sup>13</sup> But from my conscience I shall say this truly, that there is nothing great or singular in us. Though I do not deny that I am very studious and desirous of the good arts, nevertheless I do not take to myself or lay claim to the name of learned man. Wherefore I laid such a great burden on my shoulders not because I was unconscious of our infirmity, but because I knew that this sort of struggle, that is, literary, was peculiar in that here it is a gain to lose. Consequently, anyone very weak can and should not only not disparage them, but also seek them voluntarily, since the loser truly receives benefit and not injury from the winner, for through him the loser returns home richer, that is, more learned and readier for future fights. Inspired by this hope, I, weak soldier though I be, have not been afraid to challenge the bravest and strongest of all to such a heavy battle. Whether it was an act of boldness or not can in any case be judged more rightly from the outcome of the fight than from my age.

It remains in the third place for me to answer those who are offended by the numerous multitude of things proposed, as if this burden sat upon their shoulders, and as if it were not I alone who have to endure this toil, howsoever great. It is certainly unbecoming and peevish to wish to set limits to another's industry, and, as Cicero says, to desire mediocrity in a case where the greater is the better.<sup>14</sup> All in all, it was necessary for

<sup>12</sup> Job 32:8. The Vulgate reads, "The spirit is in men," *hominibus*; Pico reads "in all," *omnibus*.

<sup>13</sup> I Timothy 4:12.

<sup>14</sup> *De finibus* I. 1.

me either to fail or to succeed in such great undertakings. If I should succeed, I do not see why it is praiseworthy for me to distinguish myself on ten questions, while it is thought blame-worthy for me to have distinguished myself on nine hundred. If I should fail, they will have grounds for accusing me, if they hate me; for excusing me, if they love me. This is so because a young man of modest talents and scanty learning who has failed in such a serious and great matter will merit pardon rather than accusation. Indeed, according to the poet, "If strength fails, boldness will surely be glory: in great things it is enough to have willed."<sup>15</sup> But if in our age many men, imitating Gorgias the Leontine,<sup>16</sup> have been accustomed not without praise to propose a disputation not merely on nine hundred questions but on all questions about all arts, why am I not allowed to dispute without blame on many questions indeed, but still on a fixed and determinate number? But, they say, this is needless and ambitious. Yet I contend that I did this not needlessly, but of necessity. But if they should consider with me my reasons for philosophizing, let them reluctantly confess that it is clearly of necessity.

Those who have devoted themselves to any one of the schools of philosophy, inclining for example to Thomas or Scotus, who now are much followed, can bring their doctrine into danger in the discussion of a few questions. But I have resolved not to swear by anyone's word, that I may base myself on all teachers of philosophy, examine all writings, recognize every school. Wherefore, since I had to speak on all questions (lest, if as defender of a personal doctrine, neglecting others, I should seem to be hampered by it), even if few questions might be raised about individual doctrines, there could not fail to be very many that were brought forward simultaneously concerning all. Nor should anyone condemn in me that wherever the tempest bears me, I am brought as a guest.<sup>17</sup> For it was a prac-

<sup>15</sup> Propertius, *Elegies* II. 10. 5-6.

<sup>16</sup> Gorgias, c. 485-375 B.C., Sophist who claimed to be able to answer any question; character in Plato's *Gorgias*.

<sup>17</sup> Horace, *Epistles* I. 1. 15.

tice of the ancients to study every school of writers, and if possible, to pass over no treatises unread; and especially those of Aristotle, who because of this was called by Plato ἀναγνώστης, that is, reader. And it indeed belongs to a narrow mind to have kept oneself within one Porch or Academy. Nor can anyone have selected rightly his own doctrine from all, unless he has first made himself familiar with all.

Further, in each school there is something notable that it does not have in common with the others. But let me now begin with ourselves, whom philosophy has at last reached. In John Scotus there is certain vigor and breadth. In Thomas, a solidity and equilibrium. In Aegidius, a terseness and precision. In Francis, a sharpness and pointedness. In old Albert, spaciousness and grandeur. In Henry, so it seems to me, there is always something sublime and venerable.<sup>18</sup> Among the Arabs, there is in Averroes a firmness and steadiness. In Avempace and in Alfarabi, something grave and well meditated. In Avicenna, something divine and Platonic.<sup>19</sup> Among the Greeks universally there is, especially, a certain brilliance and chasteness of philosophy. In Simplicius, richness and abundance. In Themistius, elegance and concision. In Alexander, steadfastness and learning. In Theophrastus, a serious working out of things. In Ammonius, a smoothness and pleasingness.<sup>20</sup> And if you turn to the Platon-

<sup>18</sup> John Duns Scotus, 1266?-1308, Franciscan; St. Thomas Aquinas, 1225-1274, Dominican; Aegidius, or Giles of Rome, 1247?-1316; Francis of Mayrone, d. c. 1326, Franciscan follower of Duns Scotus; Albert the Great, or Albertus Magnus, c. 1200-1280, Dominican, teacher of St. Thomas; Henry of Ghent, d. 1293, Augustinian.

<sup>19</sup> Averroes, Ibn Rushd, 1126-1198, chief representative of Arabic philosophy in Spain, known as "The Commentator" on Aristotle. Avempace, Ibn-ae Sa'igh, d. 1138, first outstanding Spanish representative of Aristotelian-Neoplatonic tradition, laid ground for Averroes. Alfarabi, c. 870-950, Moslem philosopher in central Asia, was taught the Neoplatonism and Aristotelianism of Christian Arabic philosophers; influenced most later Arabic philosophers. Avicenna, Ibn Sina, 980-1037, Persian physician and philosopher, of Aristotelian and Plotinian influence.

<sup>20</sup> Simplicius, 6th century, and Themistius, 4th century, Greek commentators on Aristotle. Alexander of Aphrodisias, 2nd-century commentator on Aristotle and head of the Lyceum in Athens. Theophrastus, 4th-3rd cen-

ists, to go over a few of them: in Porphyry you will be pleased by an abundance of materials and a complex religion. In Jamblichus you will feel awe at a more hidden philosophy and at the mysteries of the barbarians. In Plotinus there is no one thing in particular for you to wonder at, for he offers himself to our wonder in every part; and while he speaks in a divine manner about divine things, and of human things in a manner far above man, with a learned indirectness of discourse, the sweating Platonists scarcely understand.<sup>21</sup> I pass over the more recent: Proclus, abounding in Asiatic fertility, and those who have flowed from him, Hermias, Damascius, Olympiodorus<sup>22</sup> and many others, in all of whom there always shines that  $\tauὸ\thetaεῖον$ , that is, divine something, the peculiar emblem of the Platonists. 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.<sup>23</sup> What good was it if only the philosophy of the Latins would be treated, namely, Thomas, Scotus, Aegidius, Francis, and Henry, without the Greek and Arab philosophers? All wisdom flowed from the barbarians to

tury B.C., follower of Aristotle and his successor as head of the Academy. Ammonius Saccas, 175-242, Alexandrian Neoplatonist, teacher of Origen and Plotinus.

<sup>21</sup> Porphyry, 232-c. 305, Neoplatonist, devoted disciple of Plotinus. Jamblichus, c. 250-c. 325, follower of Porphyry. Plotinus, 205-269/70, the most outstanding of the Neoplatonists, whose *Enneads* had much influence on Pico.

<sup>22</sup> Proclus, 5th-century, most important representative of late Neoplatonism. Hermias, disciple of Proclus. Damascius and Olympiodorus are 6th-century followers of Proclus.

<sup>23</sup> Plato, *Epistle VII*, 341d.

the Greeks, and from the Greeks to us.<sup>24</sup> So our people, in their way of philosophizing, always thought it enough for them if they remained with foreign discoveries and cultivated foreign things. What good was it to treat of natural things with the Peripatetics, unless the academy of the Platonists was also summoned, whose doctrine on divine things has always been held very sacred among all philosophies (witness Augustine), and also has by me now, for the first time after many centuries (as I know, and may there be no envy at the word), been brought forward publicly to undergo the test of disputation.

What good was it to have dealt with the opinions of others in any number, if, as though coming to a banquet of the wise without contributing anything, we brought nothing which would be our own, given birth and perfected by our mind. Indeed it is ignoble, as Seneca says, to know only by way of commentary, and, as if the discoveries of the ancients had closed the road for our industry, as if the force of nature in us were exhausted, to give birth to nothing from ourselves, which, if it does not demonstrate truth, at least points to it as from a distance.<sup>25</sup> But if a farmer hates sterility in a field, and a husband in a wife, certainly a barren soul is hated by the divine mind woven into it and allied with it, the more a far nobler offspring is desired from it.

Consequently I was not content to have added, beside the common teachings, much on the ancient theology of Mercury Trismegistus,<sup>26</sup> much on the doctrines of the Chaldaeans and of Pythagoras, and much on the more secret mysteries of the Jews, and I also proposed for disputation very many things discovered and thought out by us on natural and divine matters.

First, I have proposed the concord of Plato and Aristotle, believed by many before now, but adequately proved by no one. Among the Latins, Boethius, who promised to prove it, is not

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* X. 10. 2; XIV. 10. 48 ff. Theodore-tus, *Curatio* I. 41e ff.

<sup>25</sup> Seneca, *Epistles* XXXIII. 7.

<sup>26</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, or the Egyptian god Thoth, reputed author of writings on occultism and theology of the first three centuries A.D.

found ever to have done what he always wished to do.<sup>27</sup> Among the Greeks, Simplicius made the same declaration: would that he had fulfilled his promise.<sup>28</sup> Augustine too wrote in his *Academica* that there have been many who have attempted to prove the same thing in their very subtle disputation, namely, that the philosophy of Plato and of Aristotle is the same.<sup>29</sup> Again, John the Grammarian,<sup>30</sup> although he says that Plato seems to differ from Aristotle only to those who do not understand what Plato says, nevertheless left no proof of this to posterity. Further, we have added several points where the thoughts of Scotus and Thomas, of Averroes and Avicenna, which are considered to be discordant, we have maintained to be in concord.

Second, we have put down the seventy-two new physical and metaphysical doctrines which we have thought out in Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy. If one holds to them he will be able, unless I am wrong, as will soon be clear to me, to solve any question proposed about the things of nature or of God, in a fashion far other than we are taught by that philosophy which is read in the schools and cultivated by the doctors of these times. And, fathers, no one should wonder that in my early years, at a tender age at which it has been hardly permitted me (as some maintain) to read the meditations of others, I should wish to bring forward a new philosophy. They should either praise this philosophy if it is defended, or condemn it if it is refuted; and finally, since they are to judge of these our discoveries and our learning, they should reckon up not the years of the author, but rather the merits or demerits of these things.

Besides this we have brought forward something else new, the ancient system of philosophizing through numbers. It was held to by the early theologians, by Pythagoras in particular, by

<sup>27</sup> Boethius (5th-6th century), *De interpretatione* II. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Simplicius, *Categoriae* 28; *Physica* 404. 16.

<sup>29</sup> Augustine, *Contra academicos* III. 42.

<sup>30</sup> John Grammaticus or Philoponus, 7th-century Alexandrian commentator on Aristotle.

Aglaophamus, by Philolaus, by Plato and the early Platonists.<sup>1</sup> But in this age, this doctrine, like other famous ones, has so passed out of use by the negligence of posterity, that scarcely any traces of it are to be found. Plato writes in the *Epinomis*<sup>2</sup> that among all liberal arts and theoretical sciences the science of numbering is chief and most divine. Again, asking why man is the wisest animal, he answers that it is because he knows how to number. Aristotle also records this opinion in his *Problematum*.<sup>3</sup> Abumasar writes that there was a saying of Avenzoar the Babylonian that he who knows how to number knows all things. These things could not in any way be true if they had understood by the art of numbering that art at which now the merchants are expert above all. Plato also witnesses this, warning us in a loud voice not to confuse this divine arithmetic with mercantile arithmetic. Therefore, when, after many lucubrations, it seemed to me that I had explored that arithmetic which is so praised, I went to put this thing to a test, and I promised I would answer publicly, in order, to the seventy-four questions that are thought to be among the principal questions on nature and God.

I have proposed theorems about magic, too, wherein I have signified that magic is twofold. The first sort is put together by the work and authorship of demons, and is a thing, as God is true, execrable and monstrous. The other sort is, when well explored, nothing but the absolute consummation of the philosophy of nature. When the Greeks mention these, they call the first sort *yoγreίav*, not dignifying it in any way by the name magic. They call the second sort by its proper and peculiar name, *μαγείav*, the perfect and highest wisdom, as it were. Porphyry says that in the language of the Persians, magician means the same thing as interpreter and lover of divine things means in our language.<sup>4</sup> Now there is a great, or rather, fathers, there is the greatest disparity and unlikeness between these arts. Not only the Christian religion, but all laws, every well ordered

<sup>1</sup> Proclus, *Commentary on Timaeus* V, Proem; *Theologia platonica* I. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Epinomis* 677 ff.; *Republic* 525d-e.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Problems* XXX. 6, 956a.

<sup>4</sup> Porphyry, *De abstinentia* IV. 16.

state, condemns and curses the first. All wise men, all nations studious of things heavenly and divine, approve and embrace the second. The first is the most fraudulent of arts, the second is firm, faithful, and solid. Whoever cultivated the first always dissimulated it, because it would be in ignominy and disgrace of the author. From the second comes the highest splendor and glory of letters, desired in ancient times and almost always since then. No man who was a philosopher and desirous of learning good arts has ever been studious of the first. Pythagoras, Empedocles, Democritus, Plato, traveled across seas to learn the second. When they came back, they preached it and held it chief among their esoteric doctrines.<sup>5</sup> The first can be proved by no arguments nor certain founders; the second, honored as it were by most illustrious parents, has two principal founders: Xalmosis, whom Abbaris the Hyperborean imitated, and Zoroaster, not the one whom you perhaps think, but the son of Oromasus. If we question Plato as to what is the magic of each of them, he will answer in the *Alcibiades* that Zoroaster's magic is nothing but that knowledge of divine things wherein the kings of Persia educated their sons, that after the pattern of the republic of the world they might themselves be taught to rule their own republic.<sup>6</sup> He will reply in the *Charmides* that the magic of Xalmosis is medicine of the soul, by which temperance is obtained for the soul, as health is obtained for the body by medicine.<sup>7</sup> Afterwards Carondas, Damigeron, Apollonius, Hostanes, and Dardanus continued in their footsteps.<sup>8</sup> So did Homer, whom we shall prove sometime in our *Poetic Theology* to have disguised this magic too, just as he did all other wisdoms, under the wanderings of Ulysses.<sup>9</sup> Eudoxus and Hermippus continued in their footsteps.<sup>10</sup> Nearly all who have

<sup>5</sup> Pliny, *Natural History* XXX. 1 (2).

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Alcibiades I*, 121 ff. Xalmosis or Zalmoxis, 6th century B.C., slave who later became a disciple of Pythagoras.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Charmides* 156.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Tertullian, *De anima* 57.

<sup>9</sup> Pliny, *Natural History* XXX. 1 (2).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* Eudoxus of Cnidus, c. 408-355, mathematician, astronomer, philosopher; studied under Plato. Hermippus, 5th century B.C., opponent of Pericles.

examined closely the Pythagorean and Platonic mysteries have continued also. I find three among the moderns who have caught the scent of it, Alchindus the Arab, Roger Bacon, and William of Paris [of Auvergne]. Plotinus too mentions it, where he shows that the magician is the minister and not the maker of nature.<sup>11</sup> That most wise man proves and asserts this second magic, so abhorring the other that, invited to the rites of evil demons, he replied that it was more fitting for them to come to him than for him to go to them, and rightly so.<sup>12</sup> For as the first magic makes man subject to and delivered over to the powers of wickedness, so the second makes him their prince and lord. Finally, the first cannot claim for itself the name of either art or science. The second is full of the deepest mysteries and includes the most profound and hidden contemplation of things, and finally, the knowledge of all nature. The second, among the virtues sown by the kindness of God and planted in the world, as if calling them out from darkness into light, does not so much make wonders as carefully serve nature which makes them. Having carefully investigated the harmony of the universe, which the Greeks very expressively call *συμπάθειαν*,<sup>13</sup> and having looked closely into the knowledge that natures have of each other, this second magic, applying to each thing its innate charms, which are called by magicians *ἴγγες*,<sup>14</sup> as if it were itself the maker, discloses in public the wonders lying hidden in the recesses of the world, in the bosom of nature, in the storerooms and secrets of God. And as the farmer marries elm to vine, so the magician marries earth to heaven, that is, lower things to the qualities and virtues of higher things. Hence the first magic appears as monstrous and harmful as the second, divine and salutary. And especially because the first magic

<sup>11</sup> Alchindus or Al-Kindi, d. 873, the founder of Arab philosophy, an Aristotelian influenced by Neoplatonism. Roger Bacon, c. 1214-1292, English Franciscan. William of Auvergne, c. 1180-1249, Bishop of Paris. Plotinus, *Enneads* IV. 4. 42-43.

<sup>12</sup> Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* X. 34-35.

<sup>13</sup> "Sympathy." Pliny, *Natural History* XX. 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Scholia in Theocritum vetera* II. 17 (Wendel). Cf. *Oracula Chaldaica*, ed. Kroll, pp. 39 ff.; Psellus, *Hypotyposis* (ed. Kroll, 4, p. 73).

delivers man over to the enemies of God, calls him away from God, this second magic arouses that admiration at the works of God which so prepares that charity, faith, and hope most surely follow. For nothing impels more toward religion and the worship of God than assiduous contemplation of the wonders of God. When we shall have well explored these wonders by means of this natural magic we are speaking of, we shall be inspired more ardently to the worship and love of the maker, and shall be driven to sing: "The heavens are full, all the earth is full of the majesty of Thy glory."<sup>15</sup>

And this is enough about magic, about which I have said these things because I know there are many people who, as dogs always bark at strangers, so also often condemn and hate what they do not understand.

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. And lest by chance they be thought by those to whom they are unknown to be fictitious nonsense or tales about rumors, I wish everyone to understand what and of what sort they are, whence sought, by which and how famous authors they are guaranteed, and how they were stored away, how divinely inspired they are, and how necessary to us for defending religion against the rude slanders of the Hebrews. Not only do celebrated doctors of the Hebrews, but also among us Esdras, Hilary, and Origen<sup>16</sup> write that Moses on the mountain received from God not only the law, which, as written down in five books, he left to posterity, but also a more secret and true interpretation of the law. But God commanded him to publish the law indeed to the people, yet not to pass on in writing the interpretation of the law, or to make it generally known, but to reveal it himself under a great holy seal of silence to Jesus Nave alone, and afterwards he to the other high priests

<sup>15</sup> Isaiah 6:3.

<sup>16</sup> Esdras or Ezra, Jewish priest and scribe active after return from his exile, 538 B.C. St. Hilary, Bishop of Poitiers, c. 300-367, wrote against Arian heresy. Origen, c. 185-c. 254, with exception of Augustine, the most influential theologian of the ancient church, much admired by Pico.

succeeding him.<sup>17</sup> It was enough to recognize by means of the plain story, now the power of God, now his anger against the wicked, his mercy toward the good, and his justice toward all; and by means of the divine and saving precepts to be taught to live well and blessedly, and the worship of the true religion. But to disclose to the people the more secret mysteries, things hidden under the bark of the law and the rough covering of words, the secrets of the highest divinity, what was that other than to give what is holy to dogs and to cast pearls among swine?<sup>18</sup> Consequently it was not human prudence but divine command to keep these things secret from the people, and to communicate them to the perfect, among whom alone Paul says that he spoke wisdom.<sup>19</sup> The ancient philosophers observed this custom very faithfully. Pythagoras wrote nothing but a few little things which, on dying, he entrusted to his daughter Dama. The sphinxes carved on the temples of the Egyptians warned them to guard mystical doctrines inviolate from the profane multitude, in the entanglements of enigmas. Plato, writing to Dionysius some things about the highest substances, says, "I must speak in enigmas, so that if the letter by chance comes into the hands of others, what I have written you may not be understood by them."<sup>20</sup> Aristotle said that his books of *Metaphysics*, which treat of divine things, are published and not published. What more? Origen asserts that Jesus Christ the master of life revealed many things to his disciples which they did not want to write down, lest they become common to the vulgar. Dionysius the Areopagite especially confirms this, who says that the more secret mysteries were handed down by the founders of our religion ἐκ νοῦ εἰς νοῦν διὰ μέσου λόγου, from soul to soul, without writing, by means of words passing down. Because that divinely given, true interpretation of the law of Moses was revealed by command of God in just this same way, it is called Cabala, which means the same thing among the Hebrews as *reception*

<sup>17</sup> IV Esdras 14:45-47.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 7:6.

<sup>19</sup> I Corinthians 2:6.

<sup>20</sup> Plato, *Epistle II*, 312d-e. Jamblichus, *Vita Pythagoras* XXVIII. 146.

does among us. This is so because one man would receive this doctrine from another not through written records, but by regular succession of disclosure, by law of inheritance, as it were. But after the Hebrews had been liberated by Cyrus from captivity in Babylon, and the temple had been restored under Zorobabel, they turned their minds to repairing the law. Esdras, then governor of the church, after he corrected the book of Moses, clearly knew that the custom instituted by the forefathers of passing the doctrine on by hand could not be preserved through the exiles, slaughters, flights, and captivity of the people of Israel, and that the secrets of heavenly doctrine, granted to him by God, would henceforth perish, as they could not remain long in memory without the mediation of writings. Consequently, he decreed that all the wise men who were then left should be called together, and each of them should bring together what he remembered about the mysteries of the law. After scribes were summoned, it should then be written down in seventy volumes, for there were about that many wise men in the Sanhedrin. Do not take my word only for this, fathers, but listen to Esdras himself speaking, thus: "When forty days had passed, the most high spoke, saying: 'Place in the open what you formerly wrote, so that the worthy and unworthy may read. But you will save the last seventy books so that you may pass them on to the wise among your people. For in them is the heart of understanding and the fountain of wisdom and the river of knowledge.' And so I have done."<sup>21</sup> These are the words of Esdras. These are the books of the knowledge of Cabala. Esdras proclaimed at the beginning in a clear voice that in these books was rightly the heart of understanding, that is, an ineffable theology of supersubstantial deity, the fountain of wisdom, that is, an exact metaphysics of intelligible angels and forms, and the river of knowledge, that is, a most sure philosophy of natural things.

Pope Sixtus IV, who preceded Innocent VIII under whom we happily live, provided with the greatest care and zeal that

<sup>21</sup> IV Esdra 14:45-47.

these books should be translated into Latin for the public advantage of our faith. And so, when he died, three of them came through to the Latins. In this age these books are cherished among the Hebrews with such religious awe that no one is allowed to touch them unless he is forty years old.

When I had procured myself these books at no small expense and had read them through with the greatest diligence and unwearyed labor, I saw in them (God is my witness) a religion not so much Mosaic as Christian. There is the mystery of the Trinity, there the incarnation of the Word, there the divinity of the Messiah; there I read the same things on original sin, on Christ's atonement for it, on the heavenly Jerusalem, on the fall of demons, on the orders of angels, on purgatory, on the punishments of hell, which we daily read in Paul and Dionysius, in Jerome and Augustine. In those matters that regard philosophy, you may really hear Pythagoras and Plato, whose doctrines are so akin to Christian faith that our Augustine gives great thanks to God that the books of the Platonists came into his hands. In short, there is hardly any dispute between us and the Hebrews on this wherein they cannot be so disproved and refuted from the books of the Cabalists that there is no corner left in which they may hide. I have Antonius Cronicus, a most learned man, as a very trustworthy witness to this. When I was at his house at a banquet he heard with his own ears Dactylus the Hebrew, who was learned in this science, come down on his feet and hands to the exact belief of Christians on the Trinity.

But to return to the review of the topics of my disputation, we have advanced our opinion on the interpretation of the poems of Orpheus<sup>22</sup> and Zoroaster. Orpheus is read almost wholly in Greek, Zoroaster partly in Greek, but more completely in Chaldaean. Both are believed to be the fathers and founders of ancient wisdom. I am silent about Zoroaster, who is frequently mentioned by the Platonists, always with the greatest veneration. Jamblichus the Chalcidean writes that

<sup>22</sup> Orpheus, legendary founder of the religious, philosophical cult Orphism.

Pythagoras had the Orphic theology as the model after which he molded and formed his own philosophy.<sup>28</sup> In fact, they say that the words of Pythagoras are called holy only because they flowed from the teachings of Orpheus: thence as from their primal source flowed the secret doctrine of numbers, and whatever Greek philosophy had that was great and sublime. But, as was the practice of ancient theologians, Orpheus covered the mysteries of his doctrines with the wrappings of fables, and disguised them with a poetic garment, so that whoever reads his hymns may believe there is nothing underneath but tales and the purest nonsense. I wished to say this so that it may be known with what labor, with what difficulty I dug out the hidden meanings of a secret philosophy from the calculated meshes of riddles and from hiding-places in fables, especially with no help from the work and industry of other interpreters in such a weighty, abstruse, and unexplored field.

And still these dogs of mine bark that I have heaped up minutiae and trifles for a display of many questions, as if the questions were not all those which are doubtful and most controversial, with which the principal schools struggle; as if I did not advance many utterly unknown and untried questions to those very people who criticize mine and believe themselves the most eminent of philosophers.

I am so free from that guilt that I have taken care to reduce my disputation to as few headings as I could. If, as others usually do, I had wished to divide the disputation into its parts and cut it up fine, it would have expanded into a truly innumerable number. And, not to speak of the others, who is there who does not know that I could have spun out one of the nine hundred theses, that is, that the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle are to be reconciled, into six hundred headings, not to say more, beyond all suspicion of artificial multiplicity, enumerating one by one all the places wherein others think they disagree and I think they agree? But certainly (though I shall say something neither modest nor in accord with my character), I shall say, because the envious force me to speak,

<sup>28</sup> Jamblichus, *Vita Pythagoras* XXVIII. 145.

detractors force me, that I wished by this assembly of mine to show not that I know many things, but that I know things which many people do not know.

So that the fact itself may now be made evident to you, most venerable fathers, so that my discourse may no longer delay your desire, most excellent doctors, whom not without great delight I see ready and equipped, awaiting battle (may it be happy and fortunate), let us now, as by a trumpet summons, engage hands in combat.