

PICO DELLA
MIRANDOLA



ORATION ON THE
DIGNITY OF MAN

A NEW TRANSLATION AND
COMMENTARY

Edited by

FRANCESCO BORGHESI
University of Sydney

MICHAEL PAPIO
University of Massachusetts Amherst

MASSIMO RIVA
Brown University



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and beliefs to the test of dialogue and debate; in other words, those who do not submit to human reason. Such faith in reason is based in turn on the conviction that our intellectual pursuits, beyond our religious and philosophical convictions, are all rooted in the one universal intellect that governs all things.

§§171–233 (Dino Buzzetti)

This group of sections begins with the last argument of Pico's self-vindication in the face of the criticisms raised against the proposal of a public disputation of his nine hundred theses. In his opinion, there is no cogent reason to argue against the high number of his theses or against his young age, for, on the contrary, in both cases his attempt would be praiseworthy even in the case of defeat. Far from being needless and audacious, his endeavour is timely and appropriate: a close examination of all positions and a suitable comparison of all philosophical doctrines and schools are absolutely vital to genuine philosophical inquiry. Accordingly, Pico carries on with a detailed enumeration of the several authors whose theses he lists in the first half of his nine hundred *Conclusiones*, where he represents the doctrines shared by different schools and cultural traditions. He follows the same order of the theses in mentioning first the Latins, or the Western medieval philosophers who wrote their works in Latin, followed by the Arabs and the Greeks. Conforming to a classical rhetorical model, Pico associates with each name in his survey a particular quality that vividly portrays the author's work. In Pico's mind, the merits of the comparison of different schools and opinions deserve to be vigorously emphasized. The truth can shine through only in the discussion of diverse positions because the wisdom of the latest thinkers is deeply rooted in the traditions of their predecessors, the Arabs and the Greeks, and because the Greeks themselves inherited the wisdom of the barbarians. Hence, no one can be content with just one opinion or refrain from appealing to other sources. Pico has extended his examination to the testimonies of the *prisca theologia*, the ancient theology of the Hermetic, Pythagorean, and Chaldean traditions, but comprehensive as such an approach may be, no scrutiny of the many different doctrines can substitute for a more direct and personal inquiry, such as the one Pico presents in the second part of his nine hundred theses. He proceeds therefore to describe concisely the conclusions drawn according to his own opinion and ascribes to his own merits a demonstration of the agreement between Plato and Aristotle, which many others had merely taken for granted. Pico also insists on an attempt to show the agreement among some conclusions by

Scotus and Aquinas, and likewise the harmony among certain contentions of Averroes and Avicenna. The other major ability he claims for himself is that of deriving any conclusion whatsoever on natural and metaphysical matters from completely different principles than are commonly taught in schools of his time. His is, furthermore, a new philosophy that deserves to be judged for its own worth rather than by his young age.

At this point in the *Oration*, Pico feels obliged to account for the inclusion of the somewhat remarkable areas of inquiry that he has included in his collected theses. Each of them requires a rather detailed explanation. He deals in the first place with the art of numbers, which, he contends, offers a novel method by which to prove philosophical truths, and mentions the ancient theologians and all the philosophers, from Pythagoras onward, who were conversant with it. He insists in particular on Plato, without failing, however, to refer to Aristotle and the Arabs as well. The last part of the present section is devoted to an illustration of magic, which Pico presents as the highest and most perfect form of wisdom and natural philosophy. In this lengthy exposition, he sharply distinguishes between two forms of magic, one that scarcely deserves attention and another, nobler one, which has been identified since the most ancient times with the knowledge of things divine. The first was disregarded by wise men and condemned by religion and civil laws, whereas the second was sought after by philosophers and cultivated by the forerunners of the Pythagorean and Zoroastrian traditions. The latter was praised by Plato, the Arabs, and the Schoolmen, but it is to Plotinus in particular that Pico refers in his explanation of how this noble form of magic can lead to the profoundest knowledge of the inner workings of the powers of nature. The kind of comprehensive and concise summary of the content of his nine hundred theses that Pico provides here involves a very large number of references to philosophical sources and doctrines.

The chief purpose of the notes for this group of sections was that of documenting their import and provenance. Where the reference is not literal but conjectural, it is accompanied by the indication of the commentators who have suggested it. The notes often contain quotations from the textual sources in order to help the reader to understand their use in Pico's hands as well as his intended interpretation. The other notes supplied are mainly historical. The amount of information provided is inversely proportionate to the renown of the persons and subjects there described. Particular attention has been paid to lesser-known historical characters and unusual terms; in those cases, some care has been taken in gathering information otherwise

scattered and dispersed in different or not easily available sources. Pico's direct references are selective and deliberate, and full acquaintance with them helps in the clarification of his intentions. The text of the present portion of the *Oration* may be profitably compared both with an earlier draft, preserved in the manuscript of Florence's Biblioteca Nazionale and known as Palatino 885 (fols. 143–153), and with Pico's *Apologia*, a self-defence written after the prohibition of the public discussion of his nine hundred theses and the formal condemnation of some specific points contained therein. A synopsis of the divergent passages of the *Oration* and the Palatino manuscript was first published by Pier Cesare Bori and Saverio Marchignoli,⁵⁸ and a complete collation is comprised in the appendix to Francesco Bausi's 2003 edition, where a list of the additions to the portion of the text included in the *Apologia* is also to be found.⁵⁹ The most significant variants of the earlier draft are reported here in the notes. References to the corresponding sections of the *Conclusiones* are also included.

In his praise of philosophy, Pico has shown that its ultimate goal is the attainment of peace, the friendship of all souls in their spiritual unity with God's one mind (§94). By showing that philosophical practice and meditation consist in one's preparation for the plenitude of life that holy peace alone can bestow on us (§97), Pico has justified his intention to devote himself entirely to the exercise of philosophy (§142). In this part of the text, his main concern becomes that of describing his quest for philosophical truth and defending his method of inquiry alongside the paths to philosophical wisdom that he has envisaged in opposition to the severe and unfair criticisms levelled against his endeavour. Pico's methodology refuses any indiscriminate allegiance to authority and admits only independent inquiry; he explicitly identifies his conscience as the sole judge of his opinions (§150). Determined as he is not to put his trust in the opinions of others, he boldly declares his intention to become acquainted with all doctrines and all schools (§180). He argues that a thorough examination of all philosophical positions is required not only to avoid error and unwarrantable contentions but also to discover that part of the truth which is to be found in any given philosophical doctrine or tradition (§§184–85). Consequently, the comparison of different positions (§192) appears to be the only criterion that can ensure independent thinking and promote genuine research.

58 Cf. Bori (2000, 154–58).

59 Cf. Bausi (Pico 2003, 141–56).

Pico sees philosophical practice as a matter of personal commitment and concern (§142). He is convinced that it is only through philosophy and contemplation that man can ascend to a state of passionate ardour and spiritual union with the all-embracing Divine Mind, and afterward be prepared to descend again in order to strive, with full awareness, toward peace and friendship in the earthly world (§66). He is therefore unable to renounce direct personal inquiry and necessarily must find his own way to the truth, by himself and within himself (§197). Pico's confidence in his own direct quest for truth both leads him to claim that the solution to any philosophical question whatsoever can be established by means of his new inventive principles and allows him to aver the introduction of an altogether "new philosophy" (§§206–7). On the grounds of his new principles, Pico feels entitled to declare that he has not only suggested, as many others had done, but even proved the compatibility of Plato and Aristotle (§200). Indeed, beyond Aristotle and Plato, he similarly affirms agreement between Scotus and Aquinas and between Averroes and Avicenna (§205). Pico devotes a special group of his nine hundred *Conclusiones* to the concordance between philosophical positions commonly held to be divergent and dissonant. Clearly, concord is one of Pico's major concerns. In maintaining the harmony between Plato and Aristotle, he finds himself very much in accordance with the ancient Neoplatonic tradition. Plotinus had openly said that his teachings were "no novelties" and only amounted to the interpretation and explanation of earlier doctrines (*Enneads* 5.1.8) "that ranged themselves most closely to the school of Pythagoras" (5.1.9). And Pico himself quite consistently takes a similar hermeneutical stance. He traces to different sources his notion of the Protean nature of man (§§18–23, 33) and his explanation of the three stages of the mystical progression (§70): Mosaic and Christian Scriptures (§42); the doctrines of the cabalists and the Arabs (§139); Zoroastrian (§135), Chaldaean (§43), and Hermetic (§33) theology; Pythagorean doctrines (§34); and Greek mysteries (§104). All traditions rooted in ancient theology (*prisca theologia*: §199) and wisdom (*prisca sapientia*: §259) converge in conveying the same hidden doctrines (*secreta philosophia*: §263). As in the ancient Neoplatonic tradition, the exercise of philosophy then comes to reside in the hermeneutical practice of unveiling and exposing the covert meaning of earlier writings. The more Pico sees his task as challenging and new, the less he finds possible support in the works of any other interpreters or expounders. From this point of view, the ancient method of philosophizing through numbers can also be presented as new (§208). But the art of counting that he espouses in his *Conclusiones* is not to be confused

with the arithmetic of the merchants (§212); it consists, on the contrary, in the divine arithmetic that Pythagoras introduced and shaped on the model of the Orphic theology (§260). And the same can be said of magic, which is to be seen as that science of things divine that Plato ascribes to Zoroaster (§223) and that Pythagoras, and all who travelled afar to learn it, held to be the most important form of arcane wisdom (§221). This higher and holier form of philosophy can lead us from the contemplation of the wonders and the most secret things of nature to religion and to the worship of God (§232), but we must guard against mistaking it for that execrable and most deceitful of arts that makes man a slave to wicked powers (§227) and has been condemned by religion and civil laws alike (§218). Pico's task of interpreting the ancient wisdom and all the sapiential knowledge that flowed from it (§§133–34) can thus be seen in its own right as a new form of philosophizing. The novelty of his attempt to expose hidden content and to rationalize the occult doctrines handed down in the ancient teachings can thus be easily reconciled with his effort to demonstrate the profound concord and agreement of all theological and philosophical traditions that originated from them.

§§234–68 (Massimo Riva)

In this final segment of the *Oration*, Pico explains his position toward Judaism, or, as he put it, “the ancient mysteries of the Hebrews.” In short, he claims to find in the Jewish tradition the confirmation of Catholic faith, as well as the very weapons with which to confute the “calumnies of the Jews” (§234). These pages must be read in close connection with the section of the *Conclusiones* that contains Pico's own “cabalistic theses,” as well as with relevant passages from the *Heptaplus*, Pico's commentary on Genesis, written a couple of years later (1489). Yet Pico's assimilation and treatment of the Jewish tradition (which gained him the reputation of “Christian cabalist”) are still under scrutiny and assessment by scholars, who have formulated various hypotheses about the actual sources that he may have used and the roles played by such figures as Flavius Mithridates and Yohanan Alemanno in his reading and interpretation of cabalistic texts.

The first and most important source mentioned here is actually a conflation of Esdras, Hilary, and Origen. For Pico, Esdras is a composite figure uniting the Jewish leader of the canonical Book of Ezra with the visionary from the apocryphal Greek Books of Esdras. The latter, which record the revelation received by Esdras, were conserved in the Western tradition and circulated both independently and within the compilation of the Latin Vulgate