

Humanities Institute  
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## ***Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1496)**

Pico de la Mirandola (1463-1494)

### *Historical Setting*

With our entries on Pico de la Mirandola (1463-1494), we watch the Middle Ages begin to peel off behind us. We have had our experience of Ficino's 'neoplatonic' embrace of the intelligible world, and of the guides implanted in that world, to lead us to deeper awareness of our divinity, our ensouledness, and then of our bodily existence. We feel we stand in a fresh air of time, and peer around us to find a changing cultural landscape, in which man appears with a fresh self-sufficiency, no longer the sin burdened figure of the Middle Ages, for whom it was of foremost importance to clear himself from the sins of Adam, and to reach out a paternal grace giving at the end of life.

### *Pico's youth*

Pico de la Mirandola, on the threshold of a new century, carries with him strange and copious baggage from the century that dies with him.. He is an aristocrat of the old world, born in the Aemilia Romagna region in the north of Tuscany. Well connected throughout intellectual circles in Italy he was on the move by the age of fourteen, travelling to one aristocratic home after another, then, in 1485, he made his first trip to Paris, a city then renowned—in matters of philosophy—for being a hotbed of Aristotelian Scholasticism. In the course of this travelling, and of brushing against the many schools of philosophy competing with one another in Italy, the still young Pico found himself drawn to the goal of creating a universal system of world philosophies, in which he would be able to bring together, in a single truth statement, the great philosophies (and religious-philosophical systems).

### *Global schemes*

It was from such a characteristically ambitious drive that Pico decided to call together a Vatican conference at which 900 globally valued theses would be brought together, for spiritual ratification at the highest level, and with the most advanced attention to the variety of world religions—Egyptian, Hebrew, Chaldaean, Greek, Roman—and their philosophical values. What Pico called his *Conclusions*, the sum of the 900 theses, was printed at Rome in 1486, and shortly after he completed a work, an *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, intended to clarify and *promote* the theses he had already written. This work, originally intended as explanatory material, an exordium surrounding the 900 theses which Pico had gleaned from his global reading in culture and linguistics, was left as an addendum to the theses, while in the end Pope Innocent found all of Pico's theses heretical, cancelled Pico's plans for a global conference in Rome, and in essence, from Pico's blaze of plans, left the reading world the single text, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, which is the chief bearer of Pico's genius to the 'modern world.'

### *Earlier Writings*

Prior to the publication of his *Oration*, Pico had written fitfully, and precociously, on magic and Kabbalism, which system attracted him already as a teen ager, drawn as he was to the intersecting mysteries of language and number, to Chaldaean and Hebrew religious traditions and to Christianity as a profoundly coded cult, not to mention the noosphere of Hellenic gods, who were bearers of syncretic meanings of the most concealed power. *The Oration* bears many traces of a wide search for hidden meanings, as a redemptive pathway of man's prospects.

### *The core of the Oration*

While the esotericism of the *Oration* opened global perspectives, and freed cultural literacy from its dependence on an often bland set of reference points in Greek and Roman culture, the greatest freshness of the harmony-text, to which Pico brought all the power of brilliant youth, was its uncompromising defense of man as the miracle of the world. Behind this conviction, which had its roots

everywhere in the Renaissance—in the dramatic new impulses of art and writing—was once again a revamping of the same Platonism, which in the early Christian period—among thinkers like Porphyry or Plotinus—had soared, taking with it a companion Christian theology, in which knowledge shared a place with love, at the heart of a profound conviction of the meaningfulness of human existence.

### *Neo Platonism as Knowledge*

For Pico, Platonism meant a conviction that knowledge is the true path to human achievement. He meant, of course, knowledge as spiritual knowledge, fusion with the ideas that are constitutive for the universe. This kind of knowledge, for Pico, was an amalgam of the wisdoms accumulated among all the great knowing traditions, since the beginning of time. The construction and spread of this knowledge, which reached man through the grace of the creator, was sufficient to elevate the individual man to the heights of understanding, in fact, if pursued full souledly, to raise man above the level of the Cherubim and Seraphim, divine simulacra who assume their potency just under the Level of the creator himself. Man, paradoxically enough, is enabled by his godly formation to appreciate the peculiar superiority conferred on him by his lofty role in creativity. He cannot do anything, however, without the prior collaboration of the creator. God makes it possible for men to rise above god.

### *A daring formula*

The formula enounced here, and implicit in the early Neoplatonists of Alexandria and Athens, was destined to collide with the position of the Catholic Church, and clearly shared nothing with the world view of Mediaeval Christendom, for which Christianity was the religion of sinful man, whose life was best spent in trying to earn salvation. The daring of Pico's Neo Platonist is perhaps sharpest, according to Pico, when we 'put ourselves into the mind of the creator.' From the standpoint of that divine empathy, we can best understand the colossal drama instituted by God, when he chose to people his entirely intelligible universe, peopled already with Cherubin and Seraphim, divine principles of intelligibility, with man as testimony to the glory of the intelligible universe. It is as though, Pico says, God requires a witness of his unendingly perfect creation. Man is that witness.

### *Witness and more*

Man is a witness, then, who is required to complete God's creation. In addition to serving as witness, man is an intermediary, by which intelligibility transverses the whole of god's creation. For this power to inhere in man he must be able to be 'the proud shaper of his own being,' that is must be able to elevate himself to the highest level of intelligibility, while at the same time being capable of descending into the coarsest forms of materiality. Only this radical freedom enables man to deserve his powers, which he exercises at his discretion: God observes that 'we have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer.' With this mandate God, to whom all the wisdoms of the world are imparted, gives man the absolute freedom of the godhead itself.

### *The vision of Pico*

Of special daring—and of course a threat to the powers of the Church—is Pico's insistence that man, unlike the brutes who are born smeared with mire, and can never emerge from that condition, that man is born with the seeds of pure eternity, and will persist forever. This tribute to man's available immortality, to his place among the '*spermatikoi logoi*,' the 'spermatoc principles of meaningfulness,' as Plotinus put it, is Pico's most radical and absolute expression of Humanism. That this world view outraged the church, giving man a parity with god, and that Pico seems to encapsulate, here, the most radical expression of Renaissance Humanism, is no surprise. We find ourselves here at the potency level of a Prometheus or Faustus; absolute daring places man among the creative principles of the universe.

### *The place of Pico in the new world*

We have omitted much that characterizes this dramatic figure, whose death in 1494 so nearly coincides with the beginning of a new century. The Renaissance was itself well underway, the High Middle Ages were being diluted by patchwork growths of new economies, religious dissension was eating away at the foundations of the Roman Catholic Church; we were in transition from the practical math of the market

place to the higher calculations of scientific math. Risky practices like magic, which to Pico seemed an essential tool in breaking open cosmic secrets, and exotic learning strategies, like Kabbala, or ancient Hebrew lore, were new pathways toward expansive human consciousness. The new man of Pico's intuition, who was essentially a chameleon, able to adapt to a flexible world free of many of its old strictures, was in fact a forerunner of the man of our own time, who can adapt to and make use of improbable and unheard of situations.

#### Our own time

It is in fact this chameleon image with which we would feel most at home, in trying to re understand Pico for ourselves; where we are most cornered today, in the decaying trap of an eroding planet—nature forcibly deserting us, toxicity invading land and ocean—contemplating egress into the cosmos itself. The University of Iowa offers classes in the Arizona desert, where nature is trained to simulate Martian challenges, and to give us passages into a threatened life on a (we hope) still livable biosphere. If ever biosphere is to transmute into noosphere, place to convert into mind, it may well be in the Pico-like fervor of a man-driven mission.

#### Study guide

Ficino and Pico de la Mirandola were born at the end of the fifteenth century, a century which began to see the explosion of trade, which brought ancient texts and modern goods into the purview of the literate and privileged, and made budding city states like Florence centerpieces of modern development. The two intellectuals we encounter here, at our onset, were beneficiaries of this unparalleled new world, which was destined to flow deeper, into what we are (loosely) to call a growing modernization in time, a change in perspective and cultural self-awareness, which in a winding and sterterous transition will delta out into a complex alluvium in which the mind we are today has been enabled. Neoplatonism, which serves as a bridge from man to the supernal realm of ideas, served both of our philosopher figures as the zone by which they could prove out both as 'antique philosophers' and as men to whom we can feel related at the present moment.