

PETRARCA · VALLA · FICINO · PICO  
POMPONAZZI · VIVES

# The Renaissance Philosophy of Man

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## INTRODUCTION

By PAUL OSKAR KRISTELLER

GIOVANNI PICO, count of Mirandola, thanks to his social position and to his early death, has always appealed strongly to the popular imagination, while his learning and his thought have earned him the admiration of serious scholars, both in his own time and ever since.<sup>1</sup> The circumstances of his life and death did not permit him to develop his ideas into a mature system of thought. Yet his extant writings display a remarkable wealth of knowledge and erudition and contain brilliant suggestions that were both fruitful and characteristic.

The range of Pico's learning is not only extensive; it assumes additional interest from the fact that he was able to absorb many different ideas and traditions that most of his contemporaries would have considered incompatible.<sup>2</sup> Having enjoyed a thorough classical education, he was familiar with the major works of Latin and Greek literature and philosophy; he cultivated the friendship of some of the leading Humanists of his time; and was able to write letters and treatises in a style which satisfied their meticulous standard of literary elegance. At the universities of Padua and Paris he became acquainted with the logical and philosophical tradition of the Middle Ages and with the writings of the Schoolmen. Pico was not only able to handle their technique of argument and their terminology; he was ready to defend their reputation against the attacks of his Humanist friends. Through his extended stay in Florence and through his friendship with Ficino, he became exposed to the influence of Platonic and Neo-

1. The best and most complete monograph on Pico is E. Garin's *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Vita e dottrina* (Florence, 1937).

2. For the extent of Pico's learning see P. Kibre, *The Library of Pico della Mirandola* (New York, 1936).

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Platonic doctrines emanating from the Florentine Academy. At the same time, because of his different background and ideas, he was able to enrich the thought and influence of that distinguished circle. Adding the study of Hebrew and Arabic to the more common Latin and Greek, he not only gave an impulse to oriental studies but also came into direct contact with the heritage of medieval Arabic and Jewish philosophy. Strongly shaken by his unexpected conflict with the Church authorities over his disputation, in his later years Pico showed an increasing concern for religion and finally became a friend and follower of Savonarola. If we add to this his interest in vernacular Italian poetry and literature, we have the picture of a many-sided if not "universal" intellectual activity that corresponded to the best traditions and ideals of his time.

No less significant are the direct contributions which Pico made to the thought of the Renaissance. His attack on astrology, though prompted by religious and moral rather than by scientific considerations, remains a remarkable episode that made an impression on Kepler himself. Pico's interest in the Cabala led to a broad current of Christian Cabalism which includes, among others, John Reuchlin, and which remained important throughout the sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

Even more important are Pico's conception of the dignity of man and his ideal of a universal harmony among philosophers. Both find eloquent expression in the short treatise known as the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. Since the *Oration* is one of Pico's most famous writings, it seems strange that it has not been translated into English long ago,<sup>4</sup> for the little work fully de-

3. Joseph L. Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of the Cabala in the Renaissance* (New York, 1944).

4. An English translation by Charles Glenn Wallis was recently published in the magazine *View* (fall, 1944, pp. 88-90, 100-101; December, 1944, pp. 134-35; 146-51). However, the present translation has been ready for publication for many years, and several passages from it were published as early as 1942 (*Journal of the History of Ideas*, III [1942], 347-54).

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serves its reputation, as its content is both intrinsically interesting and characteristic of its author and of its time. A recent attempt to dismiss this work as a merely rhetorical exercise is not convincing; its characteristic ideas are confirmed by Pico's other writings, and a rhetorical form of expression is no proof that the author does not mean to indorse the ideas he is setting forth in that fashion.<sup>5</sup>

In order to understand the content and significance of the *Oration*, it is important to recall the circumstances of its composition. In December, 1486, Pico published in Rome his nine hundred theses, inviting all scholars interested to a public disputation in January, 1487. The disputation never took place. Pope Innocent VIII suspended it and appointed a commission to examine the theses. The commission condemned some of them as heretical; and, when Pico tried to defend the incriminated theses in an *Apologia*, he made things even worse and became involved in a conflict with the papal authorities that was to last for several years. Pico's *Oration* was written as an introductory speech for this projected disputation, probably in 1486. Apparently it was not usual to furnish this kind of rhetorical introduction for a disputation. Yet introductory speeches at the beginning of the school year or at the opening of particular courses were an established custom of medieval schools and universities—a custom further developed by the Humanists of the Renaissance. Pico's disputation speech was obviously patterned after such examples of academic eloquence. Especially typical is the scheme of the two parts, the first dealing with a general philosophical theme, the second announcing and justifying the topics of the disputation that is to follow. The above-mentioned events explain why the speech was never delivered and why its text was not published during Pico's lifetime. It may be added that the second half was incorporated almost verbally in the *Apologia*.

5. See Avery Dulles, *Princeps concordiae: Pico della Mirandola and the Scholastic Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1941).

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The *Oration* was printed only after Pico's death, when his nephew, Gian Francesco, included it in a posthumous edition of his uncle's collected works. After the *Oration*, especially its first part, had become famous, some of the later editions added to the simple original title "Oration" the now familiar words "On the Dignity of Man." The criticism often voiced that the *Oration* does not correspond to its title except at the outset is hence without foundation.

The first part of the *Oration* attempts a general justification of the study of philosophy. Pico begins with a praise of man. But he rejects as unsatisfactory the traditional views that man owes his distinction to his place in the center of things or to his character as a microcosm. (The true distinction of man consists rather in the fact that he has no fixed properties but has the power to share in the properties of all other beings, according to his own free choice. Yet since man has this power of choosing what form and value his life shall acquire, it is his lot and duty to make the best possible choice and to elevate himself to the life of the angels. In this ascent toward the highest form of life he is assisted by philosophy and its various parts. The second part of the *Oration* explains Pico's own interest in philosophy and the plan of his disputation. He is proposing to defend so great a number of theses because he does not follow the teachings of any particular thinker or school but wants to support propositions drawn from many different sources. This leads to a survey of his nine hundred theses, in which he discusses the various thinkers from whom most of them are taken and then emphasizes the original contribution he is trying to make with some of the others. This survey follows on the whole the arrangement of the *Conclusiones* as they appear in the printed editions. The speech ends with an appeal to the supposed audience to begin the disputation.

The general scheme of the *Oration* is obviously adapted to the occasion for which it was written, yet within this setting there

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stand out two major ideas which give significance to the little work: the dignity of man and the unity of truth.

The idea of the dignity of man has a long and rather complex history. The praise of man as the inventor of the arts and crafts, as a microcosm, as a being distinguished by speech and by reason, is a common theme of ancient thought and literature. The notion that man is closer to God than any other earthly creature appears in Genesis and pervades all the Old Testament. Early Christian emphasis on the salvation of mankind and on the incarnation of Christ also implied a special position of man in the world, and some of the Church Fathers developed this notion and fused it with the conceptions inherited from pagan antiquity. All these ideas were repeated with new emphasis during the Renaissance. Giannozzo Manetti composed a treatise *On the Excellency and Dignity of Man* as a counterpart to Innocent III's work *On the Misery of Man*. Ficino, in his *Theologia Platonica*, gave an additional philosophical importance to the conception by stressing man's universality and his central position in the universe. Pico, who was undoubtedly familiar with most of these previous statements, introduced, however, an important new element. He emphasized not so much man's universality as his liberty. (Man is the only creature whose life is determined not by nature but by his own free choice; and thus man no longer occupies a fixed though distinguished place in the hierarchy of being but exists outside this hierarchy as a kind of separate world.<sup>6</sup>)

The notion of the unity of truth which dominates the second part of the *Oration* is an attempt to solve a problem that has puzzled many thinkers since ancient times: the variety and contrast between different philosophers and philosophical schools. Ancient skeptics and modern relativists have used the fact to prove

6. G. Gentile, "Il concetto dell'uomo nel Rinascimento," in his *Il Pensiero italiano del Rinascimento* (3d ed.; Florence, 1940), pp. 47-113; P. O. Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino* (New York, 1943), pp. 407 ff., and "Ficino and Pomponazzi on the Place of Man in the Universe," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, V (1944), 220-26.

that there is no truth or certainty. Another and more satisfying answer to the problem has been the assumption that the opposing schools of philosophy do not merely have a common share in error but that they rather share in a common truth. This assumption was held in antiquity by the so-called eclectics and by the Neo-Platonists; it was reasserted on different grounds by Hegel; and it still underlies the better part of the studies devoted to the "history of ideas." Pico's notion of a universal truth in which the various thinkers and schools all have a part obviously belongs to this same tradition. It has been suggested that Pico's conception may have had some connection with the Averroistic doctrine of the unity of the intellect. On the other hand, Pico may have tried to give a broader application to Ficino's doctrine of natural religion and to his attempt to reconcile Platonic philosophy and Christian theology. However this may be, Pico's "syncretism" differs from ancient "eclecticism" and modern "perspectivism" on one characteristic point which seems to reflect his Scholastic background: He does not believe with the ancient eclectics that the major philosophers all agree in their doctrines and merely disagree in their words. Nor does he believe with the modern "perspectivists" that every system of thought taken as a whole represents a particular aspect of universal truth. For Pico, truth consists in a number of true statements; and the various philosophers participate in truth in so far as their writings contain, besides numerous errors, a number of specific statements that are true and hence must be accepted. In this sense, his syncretism is exclusive as well as inclusive and further removed from skepticism than its modern counterparts.

The great influence Pico's ideas of the dignity of man and of the unity of truth were destined to exercise in the Renaissance and afterward was due not only to their intrinsic merits but also to their prominent place in the thought of Pico and of his contemporaries. The notion that man owes his distinction to his freedom and that he is emancipated from the hierarchy of being is further developed and emphasized in Pico's *Heptaplus*; the

concern for man's freedom is the underlying cause for his attack on astrology, which is the subject of his major extant work.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the unity of truth is the underlying conception of Pico's nine hundred theses; and one particular aspect of this unity—the harmony between Plato and Aristotle—was to be the subject of a large work he planned to write, of which the treatise *De ente et uno* is the only extant fragment.<sup>8</sup> It is hence understandable that some scholars consider this syncretism as the central conception of Pico's thought.<sup>9</sup>

Less obvious but equally significant are the links that connect these two conceptions with the Humanistic movement of the early Renaissance. The early Italian Humanists were primarily concerned not with philosophical speculation but rather with the development of a cultural and educational ideal that was based on the study and imitation of classical antiquity. Yet when they were driven to justify that ideal and the significance of their classical studies, they claimed that these studies contribute to the formation of a desirable human being and are hence of particular concern for man as man. This argument is reflected in such expressions as *studia Humanitatis*, the "Humanities," and the "Humanists." This emphasis on man is one of the few ideas—perhaps the only philosophical idea—contained in the program of the early Humanists. When Pico, and Ficino before him, worked out a philosophical theory of the dignity of man in the universe, they were merely giving a more systematic and speculative development to a vague idea that had dominated the thought and aspirations of their Humanist predecessors for several generations. Pico's syncretism is likewise related to the eclecticism of the early Humanists. In their opposition to the exclusive Aristotelianism of the medieval philosophers, the Humanists

7. Ernst Cassirer, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, III (1942), 123-44, 319-46.

8. Victor M. Hamm, *Pico della Mirandola: On Being and Unity, Translated from the Latin, with an Introduction* (Milwaukee, Wis., 1943).

9. E. Anagnine, *G. Pico della Mirandola: Sincretismo religioso-filosofico* (Bari, 1937).

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liked to quote and make use of the teachings of all the different ancient thinkers and schools accessible to them. They did it often in a rather haphazard and superficial manner, but they broadened the horizon and enriched the source material on which profounder thinkers could afterward draw. Pico's syncretism was a philosophical justification of this Humanist procedure and for the first time gave to it something like a positive method and dignity.

Thus the *Oration on the Dignity of Man* is not merely a piece of rhetoric; it contains ideas that are of major importance in the thought of Pico and in the thought of the Renaissance.

## ORATION ON THE DIGNITY OF MAN

I HAVE read in the records of the Arabians, reverend Fathers, that Abdala the Saracen,<sup>1</sup> when questioned as to what on this stage of the world, as it were, could be seen most worthy of wonder, replied: "There is nothing to be seen more wonderful than man." In agreement with this opinion is the saying of Hermes Trismegistus: "A great miracle, Asclepius, is man."<sup>2</sup> But when I weighed the reason for these maxims, the many grounds for the excellence of human nature reported by many men failed to satisfy me—that man is the intermediary between creatures, the intimate of the gods, the king of the lower beings, by the acuteness of his senses, by the discernment of his reason, and by the light of his intelligence the interpreter of nature, the interval between fixed eternity and fleeting time, and (as the Persians say) the bond, nay, rather, the marriage song of the world, on David's testimony but little lower than the angels.<sup>3</sup> Admittedly great though these reasons be, they are not the principal grounds, that is, those which may rightfully claim for themselves the privilege of the highest admiration. For why should we not admire more the angels themselves and the blessed choirs of heaven? At last it seems to me I have come to understand why man is the most fortunate of creatures and consequently worthy of all admiration and what precisely is that rank which is his lot in the universal chain of Being—a rank to be envied not only by brutes but even by the stars and by minds beyond this world. It is a matter past faith and a wondrous one. Why should it not be? For it is on this very account that man is rightly called and judged a great miracle and a wonderful creature indeed.

2. But hear, Fathers, exactly what this rank is and, as friendly

1. [Abdala, that is, Abd Allah, probably the cousin of Mohammed.]

2. [*Asclepius* i. 6 (*Hermetica*, ed. W. Scott, I, 294).]

3. [Ps. 8:5.]

auditors, conformably to your kindness, do me this favor. God the Father, the supreme Architect, had already built this cosmic home we behold, the most sacred temple of His godhead, by the laws of His mysterious wisdom. The region above the heavens He had adorned with Intelligences, the heavenly spheres He had quickened with eternal souls, and the excrementary and filthy parts of the lower world He had filled with a multitude of animals of every kind. But, when the work was finished, the Craftsman kept wishing that there were someone to ponder the plan of so great a work, to love its beauty, and to wonder at its vastness. Therefore, when everything was done (as Moses and Timaeus bear witness), He finally took thought concerning the creation of man. But there was not among His archetypes that from which He could fashion a new offspring, nor was there in His treasure-houses anything which He might bestow on His new son as an inheritance, nor was there in the seats of all the world a place where the latter might sit to contemplate the universe. All was now complete; all things had been assigned to the highest, the middle, and the lowest orders.<sup>4</sup> But in its final creation it was not the part of the Father's power to fail as though exhausted. It was not the part of His wisdom to waver in a needful matter through poverty of counsel. It was not the part of His kindly love that he who was to praise God's divine generosity in regard to others should be compelled to condemn it in regard to himself.

3. At last the best of artisans ordained that that creature to whom He had been able to give nothing proper to himself should have joint possession of whatever had been peculiar to each of the different kinds of being. He therefore took man as a creature of indeterminate nature and, assigning him a place in the middle of the world, addressed him thus: "Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have we given thee, Adam, to the end that according to thy longing and according to thy judgment thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form, and what functions thou thyself shalt

4. [Cf. Plato *Protagoras* 321c ff.]

desire. The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by Us. Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature. We have set thee at the world's center that thou mayest from thence more easily observe whatever is in the world. We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer. Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish. Thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul's judgment, to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine."

4. O supreme generosity of God the Father, O highest and most marvelous felicity of man! To him it is granted to have whatever he chooses, to be whatever he wills. Beasts as soon as they are born (so says Lucilius)<sup>5</sup> bring with them from their mother's womb all they will ever possess. Spiritual beings, either from the beginning or soon thereafter, become what they are to be for ever and ever. On man when he came into life the Father conferred the seeds of all kinds and the germs of every way of life. Whatever seeds each man cultivates will grow to maturity and bear in him their own fruit. If they be vegetative, he will be like a plant. If sensitive, he will become brutish. If rational, he will grow into a heavenly being. If intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God.<sup>6</sup> And if, happy in the lot of no created thing, he withdraws into the center of his own unity, his spirit, made one with God, in the solitary darkness of God, who is set above all things, shall surpass them all. Who would not admire this our chameleon? Or who could more greatly admire aught else whatever? It is man who Asclepius of Athens, arguing from his mutability of character and from his self-transforming nature, on just grounds says was symbolized by Proteus in the mysteries.

5. [Frag. 623 (Marx).]

6. [Cf. Ficino *Theologia Platonica* xiv. 3.]

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Hence those metamorphoses renowned among the Hebrews and the Pythagoreans.

5. For the occult theology of the Hebrews sometimes transforms the holy Enoch into an angel of divinity whom they call "Mal'akh Adonay Shebaoth," and sometimes transforms others into other divinities.<sup>7</sup> The Pythagoreans degrade impious men into brutes and, if one is to believe Empedocles, even into plants. Mohammed, in imitation, often had this saying on his tongue: "They who have deviated from divine law become beasts," and surely he spoke justly. For it is not the bark that makes the plant but its senseless and insentient nature; neither is it the hide that makes the beast of burden but its irrational, sensitive soul; neither is it the orb form that makes the heavens but its undeviating order; nor is it the sundering from body but his spiritual intelligence that makes the angel. For if you see one abandoned to his appetites crawling on the ground, it is a plant and not a man you see; if you see one blinded by the vain illusions of imagery, as it were of Calypso, and, softened by their gnawing allurements, delivered over to his senses, it is a beast and not a man you see. If you see a philosopher determining all things by means of right reason, him you shall reverence: he is a heavenly being and not of this earth. If you see a pure contemplator, one unaware of the body and confined to the inner reaches of the mind, he is neither an earthly nor a heavenly being; he is a more reverend divinity vested with human flesh.

6. Are there any who would not admire man, who is, in the sacred writings of Moses and the Christians, not without reason described sometimes by the name of "all flesh," sometimes by that of "every creature," inasmuch as he himself molds, fashions, and changes himself into the form of all flesh and into the character of every creature? For this reason the Persian Euanthes, in describing the Chaldaean theology, writes that man has no semblance that is inborn and his very own but many that are external and foreign to him; whence this saying of the Chaldaeans:

7. [Book of Enoch 40:8.]

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"Hanorish tharah sharinas," that is, "Man is a being of varied, manifold, and inconstant nature."<sup>8</sup> But why do we emphasize this? To the end that after we have been born to this condition—that we can become what we will—we should understand that we ought to have especial care to this, that it should never be said against us that, although born to a privileged position, we failed to recognize it and became like unto wild animals and senseless beasts of burden but that rather the saying of Asaph the prophet should apply: "Ye are all angels and sons of the Most High,"<sup>9</sup> and that we may not, by abusing the most indulgent generosity of the Father, make for ourselves that freedom of choice He has given into something harmful instead of salutary. Let a certain holy ambition invade our souls, so that, not content with the mediocre, we shall pant after the highest and (since we may if we wish) toil with all our strength to obtain it.

7. Let us disdain earthly things, despise heavenly things, and, finally, esteeming less whatever is of the world, hasten to that court which is beyond the world and nearest to the Godhead. There, as the sacred mysteries relate, Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones hold the first places; let us, incapable of yielding to them, and intolerant of a lower place, emulate their dignity and their glory. If we have willed it, we shall be second to them in nothing.

8. But how shall we go about it, and what in the end shall we do? Let us consider what they do, what sort of life they lead. If we also come to lead that life (for we have the power), we shall then equal their good fortune. The Seraph burns with the fire of love. The Cherub glows with the splendor of intelligence. The Throne stands by the steadfastness of judgment. Therefore if, in giving ourselves over to the active life, we have after due consideration undertaken the care of the lower beings, we shall be strengthened with the firm stability of Thrones. If, unoccupied by deeds, we pass our time in the leisure of contemplation, con-

8. [The source of this quotation could not be discovered.]

9. [Cf. Ps. 82:6.]



sidering the Creator in the creature and the creature in the Creator, we shall be all ablaze with Cherubic light. If we long with love for the Creator himself alone, we shall speedily flame up with His consuming fire into a Seraphic likeness. Above the Throne, that is, above the just judge, God sits as Judge of the ages. Above the Cherub, that is, above him who contemplates, God flies, and cherishes him, as it were, in watching over him. For the spirit of the Lord moves upon the waters, the waters, I say, which are above the firmament<sup>10</sup> and which in Job praise the Lord with hymns before dawn. Whoso is a Seraph, that is, a lover, is in God and God in him, nay, rather, God and himself are one. Great is the power of Thrones, which we attain in using judgment, and most high the exaltation of Seraphs, which we attain in loving.

9. But by what means is one able either to judge or to love things unknown? Moses loved a God whom he saw and, as judge, administered among the people what he had first beheld in contemplation upon the mountain. Therefore, the Cherub as intermediary by his own light makes us ready for the Seraphic fire and equally lights the way to the judgment of the Thrones. This is the bond of the first minds, the Palladian order, the chief of contemplative philosophy. This is the one for us first to emulate, to court, and to understand; the one from whence we may be rapt to the heights of love and descend, well taught and well prepared, to the functions of active life. But truly it is worth while, if our life is to be modeled on the example of the Cherubic life, to have before our eyes and clearly understood both its nature and its quality and those things which are the deeds and the labor of Cherubs. But since it is not permitted us to attain this through our own efforts, we who are but flesh and know of the things of earth, let us go to the ancient fathers who, inasmuch as they were familiar and conversant with these matters, can give sure and altogether trustworthy testimony. Let us consult the Apostle Paul, the chosen vessel,<sup>11</sup> as to what he saw the hosts of

10. [Gen. 1:2.]

11. [Acts 9:15.]

Cherubim doing when he was himself exalted to the third heaven. He will answer, according to the interpretation of Dionysius,<sup>12</sup> that he saw them being purified, then being illuminated, and at last being made perfect. Let us also, therefore, by emulating the Cherubic way of life on earth, by taming the impulses of our passions with moral science, by dispelling the darkness of reason with dialectic, and by, so to speak, washing away the filth of ignorance and vice, cleanse our soul, so that her passions may not rave at random or her reason through heedlessness ever be deranged.

10. Then let us fill our well-prepared and purified soul with the light of natural philosophy, so that we may at last perfect her in the knowledge of things divine. And lest we be satisfied with those of our faith, let us consult the patriarch Jacob, whose form gleams carved on the throne of glory. Sleeping in the lower world but keeping watch in the upper, the wisest of fathers will advise us. But he will advise us through a figure (in this way everything was wont to come to those men) that there is a ladder extending from the lowest earth to the highest heaven, divided in a series of many steps, with the Lord seated at the top, and angels in contemplation ascending and descending over them alternately by turns.<sup>13</sup>

11. If this is what we must practice in our aspiration to the angelic way of life, I ask: "Who will touch the ladder of the Lord either with fouled foot or with unclean hands?" As the sacred mysteries have it, it is impious for the impure to touch the pure. But what are these feet? What these hands? Surely the foot of the soul is that most contemptible part by which the soul rests on matter as on the soil of the earth, I mean the nourishing and feeding power, the tinder of lust, and the teacher of pleasurable weakness. Why should we not call the hands of the soul its iras-

12. [Dionysius the Areopagite. The writings current under that name, composed by an unknown author probably about A.D. 500, were long attributed to Dionysius, the disciple of Paul, and hence enjoyed an enormous authority.]

13. [Gen. 28:12.]



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cible power, which struggles on its behalf as the champion of desire and as plunderer seizes in the dust and sun what desire will devour slumbering in the shade? These hands, these feet, that is, all the sentient part whereon resides the attraction of the body which, as they say, by wrenching the neck holds the soul in check, lest we be hurled down from the ladder as impious and unclean, let us bathe in moral philosophy as if in a living river. Yet this will not be enough if we wish to be companions of the angels going up and down on Jacob's ladder, unless we have first been well fitted and instructed to be promoted duly from step to step, to stray nowhere from the stairway, and to engage in the alternate comings and goings. Once we have achieved this by the art of discourse or reasoning, then, inspired by the Cherubic spirit, using philosophy through the steps of the ladder, that is, of nature, and penetrating all things from center to center, we shall sometime descend, with titanic force rending the unity like Osiris into many parts, and we shall sometimes ascend, with the force of Phoebus collecting the parts like the limbs of Osiris into a unity, until, resting at last in the bosom of the Father who is above the ladder, we shall be made perfect with the felicity of theology.

12. Let us also inquire of the just Job, who entered into a life-covenant with God before he himself was brought forth into life, what the most high God requires above all in those tens of hundreds of thousands who attend him. He will answer that it is peace, in accord with what we read in him: "He maketh peace in his high places."<sup>14</sup> And since the middle order expounds to the lower orders the counsel of the highest order, let Empedocles the philosopher expound to us the words of Job the theologian. He indicates to us a twofold nature present in our souls, by one side of which we are raised on high to the heavenly regions, and by the other side plunged downward into the lower, through strife and friendship or through war and peace, as he witnesses in the verses in which he makes complaint that he is being driven into

14. [Job 25:2.]

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the sea, himself goaded by strife and discord into the semblance of a madman and a fugitive from the gods.<sup>15</sup>

13. Surely, Fathers, there is in us a discord many times as great; we have at hand wars grievous and more than civil,<sup>16</sup> wars of the spirit which, if we dislike them, if we aspire to that peace which may so raise us to the sublime that we shall be established among the exalted of the Lord, only philosophy will entirely allay and subdue in us. In the first place, if our man but ask a truce of his enemies, moral philosophy will check the unbridled inroads of the many-sided beast and the leonine passions of wrath and violence. If we then take wiser counsel with ourselves and learn to desire the security of everlasting peace, it will be at hand and will generously fulfil our prayers. After both beasts are felled like a sacrificed sow, it will confirm an inviolable compact of holiest peace between flesh and spirit. Dialectic will appease the tumults of reason made confused and anxious by inconsistencies of statement and sophisms of syllogisms. Natural philosophy will allay the strife and differences of opinion which vex, distract, and wound the spirit from all sides. But she will so assuage them as to compel us to remember that, according to Heraclitus, nature was begotten from war, that it was on this account repeatedly called "strife" by Homer, and that it is not, therefore, in the power of natural philosophy to give us in nature a true quiet and unshaken peace but that this is the function and privilege of her mistress, that is, of holiest theology. She will show us the way and as comrade lead us to her who, seeing us hastening from afar, will exclaim "Come to me, ye who have labored. Come and I will restore you. Come to me, and I will give you peace, which the world and nature cannot give you."<sup>17</sup>

14. When we have been so soothingly called, so kindly urged, we shall fly up with winged feet, like earthly Mercuries, to the embraces of our blessed mother and enjoy that wished-for peace, most holy peace, indivisible bond, of one accord in the friendship

15. [Frag. 115. 13-14. (Diels).]

16. [Cf. Lucan *Pharsalia*. i. 1.]

17. [Matt. 11:28 and John 14:27.]

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through which all rational souls not only shall come into harmony in the one mind which is above all minds but shall in some ineffable way become altogether one. This is that friendship which the Pythagoreans say is the end of all philosophy. This is that peace which God creates in his heavens, which the angels descending to earth proclaimed to men of good will,<sup>18</sup> that through it men might ascend to heaven and become angels. Let us wish this peace for our friends, for our century. Let us wish it for every home into which we go; let us wish it for our own soul, that through it she shall herself be made the house of God, and to the end that as soon as she has cast out her uncleanness through moral philosophy and dialectic, adorned herself with manifold philosophy as with the splendor of a courtier, and crowned the pediments of her doors with the garlands of theology, the King of Glory may descend and, coming with his Father, make his stay with her. If she show herself worthy of so great a guest, she shall, by the boundless mercy which is his, in golden raiment like a wedding gown, and surrounded by a varied throng of sciences, receive her beautiful guest not merely as a guest but as a spouse from whom she will never be parted. She will desire rather to be parted from her own people and, forgetting her father's house and herself, will desire to die in herself in order to live in her spouse, in whose sight surely the death of his saints is precious<sup>19</sup>—death, I say, if we must call death that fulness of life, the consideration of which wise men have asserted to be the aim of philosophy.<sup>20</sup>

15. Let us also cite Moses himself, but little removed from the springing abundance of the holy and unspeakable wisdom by whose nectar the angels are made drunk. Let us hearken to the venerable judge in these words proclaiming laws to us who are dwellers in the desert loneliness of this body: "Let those who, as yet unclean, still need moral philosophy, live with the people outside the tabernacle under the sky, meanwhile purifying them-

18. [Luke 2: 14.]

19. [Cf. Ps. 116: 15.]

20. [Cf. Plato *Phaedo* 81a.]

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selves like the priests of Thessaly. Let those who have already ordered their conduct be received into the sanctuary but not quite yet touch the holy vessels; let them first like zealous Levites in the service of dialectic minister to the holy things of philosophy. Then when they have been admitted even to these, let them now behold the many-colored robe of the higher palace of the Lord, that is to say, the stars; let them now behold the heavenly candlestick divided into seven lights; let them now behold the fur tent, that is, the elements,<sup>21</sup> in the priesthood of philosophy, so that when they are in the end, through the favor of theological sublimity, granted entrance into the inner part of the temple, they may rejoice in the glory of the Godhead with no veil before his image." This of a surety Moses commands us and, in commanding, summons, urges, and encourages us by means of philosophy to prepare ourselves a way, while we can, to the heavenly glory to come.

16. But indeed not only the Mosaic and Christian mysteries but also the theology of the ancients show us the benefits and value of the liberal arts, the discussion of which I am about to undertake. For what else did the degrees of the initiates observed in the mysteries of the Greeks mean? For they arrived at a perception of the mysteries when they had first been purified through those expiatory sciences, as it were, moral philosophy and dialectic. What else can that perception possibly be than an interpretation of occult nature by means of philosophy? Then at length to those who were so disposed came that ΕΠΟΙΤΕΙΑ,<sup>22</sup> that is to say, the observation of things divine by the light of theology. Who would not long to be initiated into such sacred rites? Who would not desire, by neglecting all human concerns, by despising the goods of fortune, and by disregarding those of the body, to become the guest of the gods while yet living on earth, and, made drunk by the nectar of eternity, to be endowed with the gifts of immortality though still a mortal being? Who would not wish to

21. [Cf. Exod. 26: 14; 36: 19; 39: 33.]

22. [Initiation in the Eleusinian mysteries.]

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be so inflamed with those Socratic frenzies sung by Plato in the *Phaedrus*,<sup>23</sup> that, by the oarage of feet and wings escaping speedily from hence, that is, from a world set on evil, he might be borne on the fastest of courses to the heavenly Jerusalem? Let us be driven, Fathers, let us be driven by the frenzies of Socrates, that they may so throw us into ecstasy as to put our mind and ourselves in God. Let us be driven by them, if we have first done what is in our power. For if through moral philosophy the forces of our passions have by a fitting agreement become so intent on harmony that they can sing together in undisturbed concord, and if through dialectic our reason has moved progressively in a rhythmical measure, then we shall be stirred by the frenzy of the Muses and drink the heavenly harmony with our inmost hearing. Thereupon Bacchus, the leader of the Muses, by showing in his mysteries, that is, in the visible signs of nature,<sup>24</sup> the invisible things of God to us who study philosophy, will intoxicate us with the fulness of God's house, in which, if we prove faithful, like Moses, hallowed theology shall come and inspire us with a doubled frenzy. For, exalted to her lofty height, we shall measure therefrom all things that are and shall be and have been in indivisible eternity; and, admiring their original beauty, like the seers of Phoebus, we shall become her own winged lovers. And at last, roused by ineffable love as by a sting, like burning Seraphim rapt from ourselves, full of divine power we shall no longer be ourselves but shall become He Himself Who made us.

17. If anyone investigates the holy names of Apollo, their meanings and hidden mysteries, these amply show that that god is no less a philosopher than a seer; but, since Ammonius has sufficiently examined this subject, there is no reason why I should now treat it otherwise. But, Fathers, three Delphic precepts may suggest themselves to your minds, which are very necessary to those who are to go into the most sacred and revered temple, not of the false but of the true Apollo, who lights every soul as it enters this world.<sup>25</sup> You will see that they give us no other advice

23. [245b ff.]

24. [Cf. Rom. 1:20.]

25. [John 1:9.]

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than that we should with all our strength embrace this threefold philosophy which is the concern of our present debate. For the saying *μηδὲν ἄγαν*, that is, "Nothing too much," prescribes a standard and rule for all the virtues through the doctrine of the Mean, with which moral philosophy duly deals. Then the saying *γνῶθι σεαυτόν*, that is, "Know thyself," urges and encourages us to the investigation of all nature, of which the nature of man is both the connecting link and, so to speak, the "mixed bowl." For he who knows himself in himself knows all things, as Zoroaster first wrote, and then Plato in his *Alcibiades*.<sup>26</sup> When we are finally lighted in this knowledge by natural philosophy, and nearest to God are uttering the theological greeting, *εἰ*, that is, "Thou art," we shall likewise in bliss be addressing the true Apollo on intimate terms.

18. Let us also consult the wise Pythagoras, especially wise in that he never deemed himself worthy the name of a wise man. He will first enjoin us not to sit on a bushel, that is, not by unoccupied sloth to lose our rational faculty, by which the soul measures, judges, and considers all things; but we must direct and stimulate it unremittingly by the discipline and rule of dialectic. Then he will point out to us two things particularly to beware of: that we should not make water facing the sun or cut our nails while offering sacrifice. But after we have, through the agency of moral philosophy, both voided the lax desires of our too abundant pleasures and pared away like nail-cuttings the sharp corners of anger and the stings of wrath, only then may we begin to take part in the holy rites, that is, the mysteries of Bacchus we have mentioned, and to be free for our contemplation, whose father and leader the Sun is rightly named. Finally, Pythagoras will enjoin us to feed the cock, that is, to feast the divine part of our soul on the knowledge of things divine as if on substantial food and heavenly ambrosia. This is the cock at whose sight the lion, that is, all earthly power, trembles and is filled with awe. This is that cock to whom, we read in Job, intelligence was given.

26. [133c ff.]

When this cock crows, erring man comes to his senses. This cock in the twilight of morning daily sings with the morning stars as they praise God. The dying Socrates, when he hoped to join the divinity of his spirit with the divinity of a greater world, said that he owed this cock to Aesculapius, that is, to the physician of souls, now that he had passed beyond all danger of illness.<sup>27</sup>

19. Let us review also the records of the Chaldeans, and we shall see (if they are to be trusted) the road to felicity laid open to mortals through the same sciences. His Chaldaean interpreters write that it was a saying of Zoroaster that the soul is winged and that, when the wings drop off, she falls headlong into the body; and then, after her wings have grown again sufficiently, she flies back to heaven. When his followers asked him in what manner they could obtain souls winged with well-feathered wings, he replied: "Refresh ye your wings in the waters of life." Again when they asked where they should seek those waters, he answered them thus by a parable (as was the custom of the man): "God's paradise is laved and watered by four rivers, from whose same source ye may draw the waters of your salvation. The name of that in the north is Pischon, which meaneth the right. The name of that in the west is Dichon, which signifieth expiation. The name of that in the east is Chiddikel, which expresseth light, and of that in the south, Perath, which we may interpret as piety."

20. Turn your attention, Fathers, to the diligent consideration of what these doctrines of Zoroaster mean. Surely nothing else than that we should wash away the uncleanness from our eyes by moral science as if by the western waves; that we should align their keen vision toward the right by the rule of dialectic as if by the northern line; that we should then accustom them to endure in the contemplation of nature the still feeble light of truth as if it were the first rays of the rising sun, so that at last, through the agency of theological piety and the most holy worship of God, we may like heavenly eagles boldly endure the

27. [Cf. *Phaedo* 118a.]

most brilliant splendor of the meridian sun. These are, perhaps, those ideas proper to morning, midday, and evening first sung by David and given a broader interpretation by Augustine. This is that noonday light which incites the Seraphs to their goal and equally sheds light on the Cherubs. This is that country toward which Abraham, our father of old, was ever journeying. This is that place where, as the doctrines of Cabalists and Moors have handed down to posterity, there is no room for unclean spirits. And, if it is right to bring into the open anything at all of the occult mysteries, even in the guise of a riddle, since a sudden fall from heaven has condemned the head of man to dizziness, and, in the words of Jeremiah, death has come in through our windows and smitten our vitals and our heart,<sup>28</sup> let us summon Raphael, celestial physician, that he may set us free by moral philosophy and by dialectic as though by wholesome drugs. Then, when we are restored to health, Gabriel, "the strength of God," shall abide in us, leading us through the miracles of nature and showing us on every side the merit and the might of God. He will at last consign us to the high priest Michael, who will distinguish those who have completed their term in the service of philosophy with the holy office of theology as if with a crown of precious stones.

21. These, reverend Fathers, are the considerations that have not only inspired but compelled me to the study of philosophy. I should certainly not set them forth were I not answering those who are wont to condemn the study of philosophy, especially among men of rank or even of a mediocre station in life. For this whole study of philosophy has now (and it is the misfortune of our age) come to despise and contumely rather than to honor and glory. Thus this deadly and monstrous conviction has come to pervade the minds of well-nigh all—that philosophy either must be studied not at all or by few persons, as if it were absolutely nothing to have clearly ascertained, before our eyes and before our hands, the causes of things, the ways of nature, the

28. [Jer., 9: 21.]

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plan of the universe, the purposes of God, and the mysteries of heaven and earth; unless one may obtain some favor, or make money for one's self. Rather, it has come to the point where none is now deemed wise, alas, save those who make the study of wisdom a mercenary profession, and where it is possible to see the chaste Pallas, who was sent among men as the gift of the gods, hooted, hissed, and whistled off the stage; and not having anyone to love or to befriend her, unless by selling herself, as it were, she repays into the treasury of her "lover" even the ill-gained money received as the poor price of her tarnished virginity.

22. I speak all these accusations (not without the deepest grief and indignation) not against the princes of this time but against the philosophers, who both believe and openly declare that there should be no study of philosophy for the reason that no fee and no compensation have been fixed for philosophers, just as if they did not show by this one sign that they are no philosophers, that since their whole life is set either on profit or on ambition they do not embrace the very discovery of truth for its own sake. I shall grant myself this and blush not at all to praise myself to this extent that I have never studied philosophy for any other reason than that I might be a philosopher; and that I have neither hoped for any pay from my studies, from my labors by lamp-light, nor sought any other reward than the cultivation of my mind and the knowledge of the truth I have ever longed for above all things. I have always been so desirous, so enamored of this, that I have relinquished all interest in affairs private and public and given myself over entirely to leisure for contemplation, from which no disparagements of those who hate me, no curses of the enemies of wisdom, have been able in the past or will be able in the future to discourage me. Philosophy herself has taught me to rely on my own conscience rather than on the opinions of others, and always to take thought not so much that people may speak no evil of me, as, rather, that I myself may neither say nor do aught that is evil.

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23. For my part, reverend Fathers, I was not unaware that this very disputation of mine would be as grateful and pleasing to you who favor all good sciences, and have been willing to honor it with your most august presence, as it would be offensive and annoying to many others. And I know there is no lack of those who have heretofore condemned my project, and who condemn it at present on a number of grounds. Enterprises that are well and conscientiously directed toward virtue have been wont to find no fewer—not to say more—detractors than those that are wickedly and falsely directed toward vice. There are, indeed, those who do not approve of this whole method of disputation and of this institution of publicly debating on learning, maintaining that it tends rather to the parade of talent and the display of erudition than to the increase of learning. There are those who do not indeed disapprove this kind of practice, but who in no wise approve it in me because I, born I admit but twenty-four years ago, should have dared at my age to offer a disputation concerning the lofty mysteries of Christian theology, the highest topics of philosophy and unfamiliar branches of knowledge, in so famous a city, before so great an assembly of very learned men, in the presence of the apostolic senate. Others, who give me leave to offer this disputation, are unwilling to allow me to debate nine hundred theses, and misrepresent it as being a work as unnecessary and as ostentatious as it is beyond my powers. I would have yielded to their objections and given in immediately if the philosophy I profess had so instructed me; and I should not now be answering them, even with philosophy as my preceptress, if I believed that this debate between us had been undertaken for the purpose of quarreling and scolding. Therefore, let the whole intention to disparage and to exasperate depart from our minds, and malice also, which Plato writes is ever absent from the heavenly choir.<sup>29</sup> Let us in friendly wise try both questions: whether I am to debate and whether I am to debate about this great number of theses.

29. [*Phaedrus* 247a.]

24. First, as to those who revile this custom of debating in public I shall certainly not say a great deal, since this crime, if it is held a crime, is shared with me not only by all of you, excellent doctors, who have rather frequently engaged in this office not without the highest praise and glory, but also by Plato, also by Aristotle, and also by the most worthy philosophers of every age. For them it was certain that, for the attainment of the knowledge of truth they were always seeking for themselves, nothing is better than to attend as often as possible the exercise of debate. For just as bodily energy is strengthened by gymnastic exercise, so beyond doubt in this wrestling-place of letters, as it were, energy of mind becomes far stronger and more vigorous. And I could not believe, either that the poets, by the arms of Pallas which they sang, or that the Hebrews, when they called the sword the symbol of wise men, were indicating to us anything else than that such honorable contests are surely a necessary way of attaining wisdom. For this reason it is, perchance, that the Chaldaeans desired in the horoscope of one who was to be a philosopher that Mars should be to Mercury in the trinal aspect, as much as to say, "If these assemblies, these disputations, should be given up, all philosophy would become sluggish and drowsy."

25. But truly with those who say I am unequal to this commission, my method of defense is more difficult. For if I say that I am equal to it, it seems that I shall take on myself the reproach of being immodest and of thinking too well of myself, and, if I admit that I am not equal to it, the reproach of being imprudent and thoughtless. See into what straits I have fallen, in what a position I am placed, since I cannot without blame promise about myself what I cannot then fail to fulfil without blame. Perhaps I could refer to that saying of Job: "The spirit is in all men,"<sup>30</sup> and be told with Timothy, "Let no man despise thy youth."<sup>31</sup> But out of my own conscience I shall with more truth say this: that there is nothing either great or extraordinary about me. I do

30. [Job 32:8.]

31. [I Tim. 4:12.]

not deny that I am, if you will, studious and eager for the good sciences, but nevertheless I neither assume nor arrogate to myself the title of learned. However great the burden I may have taken on my shoulders, therefore, it was not because I was not perfectly aware of my own want of strength but because I knew that it is a distinction of contests of this kind, that is, literary ones, that there is a profit in being defeated. Whence it is that even the most feeble are by right able and bound not only not to decline but even more to court them, seeing that he who yields receives no injury but a benefit from the victor, in that through him he returns home even richer, that is, wiser and better equipped for future contests. Inspired by this hope, I, who am but a feeble soldier, have feared not at all to wage so burdensome a war with the strongest and most vigorous men of all. Whether this action be ill considered or not may be judged from the outcome of the battle and not from my age.

26. It remains in the third place to answer those who take offense at the great number of my propositions, as if the weight of these lay on their shoulders, and as if the burden, such as it is, were not rather to be borne by me alone. It is surely unbecoming and beyond measure captious to wish to set bounds to another's effort and, as Cicero says, to desire moderation in a matter which is the better as it is on a larger scale.<sup>32</sup> In so great a venture it was necessary for me either to give complete satisfaction or to fail utterly. Should I succeed, I do not see why what is laudable to do in an affair of ten theses should be deemed culpable to have done also in an affair of nine hundred. Should I fail, they will have the wherewithal to accuse me if they hate me and to forgive me if they love me. For the failure of a young man with but slender talent and little learning in so grave and so great a matter will be more deserving of pardon than of blame. Nay, according to the poet: "If strength fails, there shall surely be praise for daring; and to have wished for great things is enough."<sup>33</sup> And if many in our time, in imitation

32. [De finibus i. 1.]

33. [Propertius ii. 10. 5-6.]

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of Gorgias of Leontini, have been wont, not without praise, to propose debates not concerning nine hundred questions only, but also concerning all questions in all branches of knowledge, why should I not be allowed, and that without criticism, to discuss questions admittedly numerous but at least fixed and limited? Yet they say it is unnecessary and ostentatious. I contend that this enterprise of mine is in no way superfluous but necessary indeed; and if they will ponder with me the purpose of studying philosophy, they must, even against their wills, admit that it is plainly needful. Those who have devoted themselves to any one of the schools of philosophy, favoring, for instance, Thomas or Scotus, who are now most in fashion, are, to be sure, quite capable of making trial of their particular doctrines in the discussion of but a few questions. I, on the other hand, have so prepared myself that, pledged to the doctrines of no man,<sup>34</sup> I have ranged through all the masters of philosophy, investigated all books, and come to know all schools. Therefore, since I had to speak of them all in order that, as champion of the beliefs of one, I might not seem fettered to it and appear to place less value on the rest, even while proposing a few theses concerning individual schools I could not help proposing a great number concerning all the schools together. And let no man condemn me for coming as a friend whithersoever the tempest bear me. For it was a custom observed by all the ancients in studying every kind of writer to pass over none of the learned works they were able to read, and especially by Aristotle, who for this reason was called by Plato ἀναγνώστης, that is, "reader." And surely it is the part of a narrow mind to have confined itself within a single Porch or Academy. Nor can one rightly choose what suits one's self from all of them who has not first come to be familiar with them all. Consider, in addition, that there is in each school something distinctive that is not common to the others.

27. And now, to begin with the men of our faith, to whom

34. [Cf. Horace *Epistles* i. 1. 14.]

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philosophy came last: There is in John Scotus something lively and subtle; in Thomas, sound and consistent; in Aegidius, terse and exact; in Francis, acute and penetrating; in Albert, venerable, copious, and grand; in Henry, as it always seems to me, something sublime and to be revered. Among the Arabs, there is in Averroes something stable and unshaken; in Avempace . . . . ; in Alfarabi, serious and thoughtful; in Avicenna, divine and Platonic. Among the Greeks philosophy as a whole is certainly brilliant and above all chaste. With Simplicius it is rich and abundant; with Themistius, graceful and compendious; with Alexander, harmonious and learned; with Theophrastus, weightily worked out; with Ammonius, smooth and agreeable. And if you turn your attention to the Platonists, to examine a few: in Porphyry you will rejoice in the abundance of his material and in the complexity of his religion; in Jamblichus you will revere an occult philosophy and the mysteries of the East. In Plotinus there is no isolated aspect you will admire; he shows himself admirable on every side. The toiling Platonists themselves scarcely understand him when he speaks divinely of things divine and, with learned obliquity of speech, far more than humanly of human things. I prefer to pass over the later Platonists: Proclus abounding in Asiatic richness, and those stemming from him, Hermias, Damascius, Olympiodorus, and several others, in all of whom there ever gleams that τὸ θεῖον, that is, "the Divine," which is the distinctive mark of the Platonists.<sup>35</sup>

28. Add to this that any sect which assails the truer doctrines, and makes game of good causes by clever slander, strengthens rather than weakens the truth and, like flames stirred by agita-

35. [This catalogue is a brief survey of the philosophers utilized in Pico's nine hundred theses. John Scotus is Duns Scotus (d. 1308), Thomas is Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), Aegidius is Giles of Rome (d. 1316), Francis is Franciscus de Mayronis (d. 1325), Albert is Albertus Magnus (d. 1280), and Henry is Henry of Ghent (d. 1293), Averroes (d. 1198), Avempace (d. 1138), Alfarabi (d. 950), Simplicius (fl. ca. 530), Themistius (fl. ca. 350), and Alexander of Aphrodisias (fl. ca. A.D. 200). Most of the remaining thinkers are Neo-Platonists.]



tion, fans rather than extinguishes it. This has been my reason for wishing to bring before the public the opinions not of a single school alone (which satisfied some I could name) but rather of every school, to the end that that light of truth Plato mentions in his *Epistles*<sup>36</sup> through this comparison of several sects and this discussion of manifold philosophies might dawn more brightly on our minds, like the sun rising from the deep. What were the gain if only the philosophy of the Latins were investigated, that is, that of Albert, Thomas, Scotus, Aegidius, Francis, and Henry, if the Greek and Arabian philosophers were left out—since all wisdom has flowed from the East to the Greeks and from the Greeks to us? In their way of philosophizing, our Latins have always found it sufficient to stand on the discoveries of foreigners and to perfect the work of others. Of what use were it to treat with the Peripatetics on natural philosophy, unless the Platonic Academy were also invited? Their teaching in regard to divinity besides has always (as Augustine witnesses) been thought most hallowed of all philosophies;<sup>37</sup> and now for the first time, so far as I know (may no one grudge me the word), it has after many centuries been brought by me to the test of public disputation. What were it to have dealt with the opinions of others, no matter how many, if we are come to a gathering of wise men with no contribution of our own and are supplying nothing from our own store, brought forth and worked out by our own genius? It is surely an ignoble part to be wise only from a notebook (as Seneca says)<sup>38</sup> and, as if the discoveries of our predecessors had closed the way to our own industry and the power of nature were exhausted in us, to produce from ourselves nothing which, if it does not actually demonstrate the truth, at least intimates it from afar. For if a tiller of the soil hates sterility in his field, and a husband in his wife, surely the Divine mind joined to and associated with an

36. [Cf. *Epistle* vii. 341c-d.]

37. [Cf. *City of God* ix. 1 and many other passages.]

38. [*Epistles* xxxiii. 7.]

infertile soul will hate it the more in that a far nobler offspring is desired.

29. For this reason I have not been content to add to the tenets held in common many teachings taken from the ancient theology of Hermes Trismegistus, many from the doctrines of the Chaldaeans and of Pythagoras, and many from the occult mysteries of the Hebrews. I have proposed also as subjects for discussion several theses in natural philosophy and in divinity, discovered and studied by me. I have proposed, first of all, a harmony between Plato and Aristotle, believed to exist by many ere this but adequately proved by no one. Boethius among the Latins promised that he would do it, but there is no trace of his having done what he always wished to do. Among the Greeks, Simplicius made the same declaration, and would that he had been as good as his word! Augustine also writes, in the *Contra Academicos*, that there were not lacking several who tried with their keenest arguments to prove the same thing, that the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle are identical.<sup>39</sup> John the Grammarian<sup>40</sup> likewise, although he did say that Plato differs from Aristotle only in the minds of those who do not understand Plato's words, nevertheless left it to posterity to prove. I have, moreover, brought to bear several passages in which I maintain that the opinions of Scotus and Thomas, and several in which I hold that those of Averroes and Avicenna, which are considered to be contradictory, are in agreement.

30. In the second place, I have next arranged the fruit of my thinking on both the Platonic and the Aristotelian philosophy, and then seventy-two new physical and metaphysical theses by means of which whoever holds them will be able (unless I am mistaken—which will soon be made manifest to me) to answer any question whatever proposed in natural philosophy or divinity, by a system far other than we are taught in that philosophy which is studied in the schools and practised by the doctors of this age. Nor ought anyone, Fathers, to be so amazed that I, in

39. [*Contra academicos* iii. 42.]

40. [Joannes Philoponus.]

my first years, at my tender age, at which it was hardly legitimate for me (as some have taunted) to read the books of others, should wish to introduce a new philosophy; but rather one should praise it if it is sustained or condemn it if it does not find favor, and finally, when these my discoveries and my scholarship come to be judged, number not their author's years so much as their own merits or faults.

31. There is, furthermore, still another method of philosophizing through numbers, which I have introduced as new, but which is in fact old, and was observed by the earliest theologians, principally by Pythagoras, by Aglaophamos, Philolaus, and Plato, and by the first Platonists, but which in this present era, like many other illustrious things, has perished through the carelessness of posterity, so that hardly any traces of it can be found. Plato writes in the *Epinomis* that, of all the liberal arts and theoretical sciences, the science of computation is the chief and the most divine.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, inquiring, "Why is man the wisest of animals?" he concludes, "Because he knows how to count," an opinion which Aristotle also mentions in his *Problems*.<sup>42</sup> Abumassar writes that it was a saying of Avenzoar of Babylon that he knows all things who knows how to count. These statements cannot possibly be true if by the science of computation they mean that science in which, at present, merchants in particular are most skilled. To this also Plato bears witness, warning us with raised voice not to think that this divine arithmetic is the arithmetic of traders.<sup>43</sup> I therefore promised, when I seemed after much nocturnal labor to have discovered that arithmetic which is so highly extolled, that I myself would (in order to make trial of this matter) reply in public through the art of number to seventy-four questions considered of chief importance in physics and metaphysics.

32. I have also proposed theorems dealing with magic, in which I have indicated that magic has two forms, one of which depends entirely on the work and authority of demons, a thing to

41. [976c ff.]

42. [xxxii. 6. 956 a 11 ff.]

43. [Republic 525b ff.]

be abhorred, so help me the God of truth, and a monstrous thing. The other, when it is rightly pursued, is nothing else than the utter perfection of natural philosophy. While the Greeks make mention of both of them, they call the former *γοητεία*, in no wise honoring it with the name of magic; the latter they call by the characteristic and fitting name of *μαγεία*, as if it were a perfect and most high wisdom. For, as Porphyry says, in the Persian tongue *magus* expresses the same idea as "interpreter" and "worshiper of the divine" with us. Moreover, Fathers, the disparity and unlikeness between these arts is great, nay, rather, the greatest possible. The former not only the Christian religion but all religions and every well-constituted state condemn and abhor. The latter all wise men, all peoples devoted to the study of heavenly and divine things, approve and embrace. The former is the most deceitful of arts; the latter a higher and more holy philosophy. The former is vain and empty; the latter, sure, trustworthy, and sound. Whoso has cherished the former has ever dissembled, because it is a shame and a reproach to an author; but from the latter the highest renown and glory of letters was derived in ancient days, and almost always has been. No man who was a philosopher and eager to study the good arts has ever been a student of the former; but Pythagoras, Empedocles, Democritus, and Plato all traveled to study the latter, taught it when they returned, and esteemed it before all others in their mysteries. As the former is approved by no reasonable arguments, so is it not by established authors; the latter, honored by the most celebrated fathers, as it were, has in particular two authors: Zoroaster, whom Abaris the Hyperborean copied, and Zoroaster, not him of whom perhaps you are thinking but him who is the son of Oromasius.

33. If we ask Plato what the magic of both these men was, he will reply, in his *Alcibiades*,<sup>44</sup> that the magic of Zoroaster was none other than the science of the Divine in which the kings of the Persians instructed their sons, to the end that they might be

44. [122a.]

taught to rule their own commonwealth by the example of the commonwealth of the world. He will answer, in the *Charmides*,<sup>45</sup> that the magic of Zamolxis was that medicine of the soul through which temperance is brought to the soul as through temperance health is brought to the body. In their footsteps Charondas, Damigeron, Apollonius, Osthane, and Dardanus thereafter persevered. Homer persevered, whom I shall sometime prove, in my *Poetic Theology*, to have concealed this philosophy beneath the wanderings of his Ulysses, just as he has concealed all others. Eudoxus and Hermippus persevered. Almost all who have searched through the Pythagorean and Platonic mysteries have persevered. Furthermore, from among the later philosophers I find three who have scented it out—the Arabian al-Kindi, Roger Bacon, and William of Paris.<sup>46</sup> Plotinus also mentions it when he demonstrates that a *magus* is the servant of nature and not a contriver. This very wise man approves and maintains this magic, so hating the other that, when he was summoned to the rites of evil spirits, he said that they should come to him rather than that he should go to them; and surely he was right.<sup>47</sup> For even as the former makes man the bound slave of wicked powers, so does the latter make him their ruler and their lord. In conclusion, the former can claim for itself the name of neither art nor science, while the latter, abounding in the loftiest mysteries, embraces the deepest contemplation of the most secret things, and at last the knowledge of all nature. The latter, in calling forth into the light as if from their hiding-places the powers scattered and sown in the world by the loving-kindness of God, does not so much work wonders as diligently serve a wonder-working nature. The latter, having more searchingly examined into the harmony of the universe, which the Greeks with greater significance call *συμπάθεια*, and having clearly perceived the

45. [156e-157a.]

46. [Alkindi (d. ca. 870); Roger Bacon (d. 1294); William of Paris, better known as William of Auvergne (d. 1249).]

47. [Cf. Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* 10.]

reciprocal affinity of natures, and applying to each single thing the suitable and peculiar inducements (which are called the *ύργες* of the magicians) brings forth into the open the miracles concealed in the recesses of the world, in the depths of nature, and in the storehouses and mysteries of God, just as if she herself were their maker; and, as the farmer weds his elms to vines, even so does the *magus* wed earth to heaven, that is, he weds lower things to the endowments and powers of higher things. Whence it comes about that the latter is as divine and as salutary as the former is unnatural and harmful; for this reason especially, that in subjecting man to the enemies of God, the former calls him away from God, but the latter rouses him to the admiration of God's works which is the most certain condition of a willing faith, hope, and love. For nothing moves one to religion and to the worship of God more than the diligent contemplation of the wonders of God; if we have thoroughly examined them by this natural magic we are considering, we shall be compelled to sing, more ardently inspired to the worship and love of the Creator: "The heavens and all the earth are full of the majesty of thy glory."<sup>48</sup> And this is enough about magic. I have said these things about it, for I know there are many who, just as dogs always bark at strangers, in the same way often condemn and hate what they do not understand.

34. I come now to the things I have elicited from the ancient mysteries of the Hebrews and have cited for the confirmation of the inviolable Catholic faith. Lest perchance they should be deemed fabrications, trifles, or the tales of jugglers by those to whom they are unfamiliar, I wish all to understand what they are and of what sort, whence they come, by what and by how illustrious authors supported, and how mysterious, how divine, and how necessary they are to the men of our faith for defending our religion against the grievous misrepresentations of the Hebrews. Not only the famous doctors of the Hebrews, but also from among men of our opinion Esdras, Hilary, and Origen write that

48. [From the "Sanctus" of the Mass.]

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Moses on the mount received from God not only the Law, which he left to posterity written down in five books, but also a true and more occult explanation of the Law. It was, moreover, commanded him of God by all means to proclaim the Law to the people but not to commit the interpretation of the Law to writing or to make it a matter of common knowledge. He himself should reveal it only to Iesu Nave,<sup>49</sup> who in his turn should unveil it to the other high priests to come after him, under a strict obligation of silence. It was enough through guileless story to recognize now the power of God, now his wrath against the wicked, his mercy to the righteous, his justice to all; and through divine and beneficial precepts to be brought to a good and happy way of life and the worship of true religion. But to make public the occult mysteries, the secrets of the supreme Godhead hidden beneath the shell of the Law and under a clumsy show of words—what else were this than to give a holy thing to dogs and to cast pearls before swine?<sup>50</sup> Therefore to keep hidden from the people the things to be shared by the initiate, among whom alone, Paul says, he spoke wisdom, was not the part of human deliberation but of divine command.<sup>51</sup> This custom the ancient philosophers most reverently observed, for Pythagoras wrote nothing except a few trifles, which he intrusted on his deathbed to his daughter Dama. The Sphinxes carved on the temples of the Egyptians reminded them that mystic doctrines should be kept inviolable from the common herd by means of the knots of riddles. Plato, writing certain things to Dion concerning the highest substances, said: "It must be stated in riddles, lest the letter should fall by chance into the hands of others and what I am writing to you should be apprehended by others."<sup>52</sup> Aristotle used to say that his books of *Metaphysics*, in which he treated of things divine, were both published and not published. What further? Origen asserts that Jesus Christ, the Teacher of life, made many revelations to his disciples, which they were unwilling to write down

49. [Cf. Eccles. 46: 1.]

50. [Cf. Matt. 7: 6.]

51. [Cf. Rom. 1: 17 and I Cor. 2: 13.]

52. [Epistle ii. 321d.]

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lest they should become commonplaces to the rabble. This is in the highest degree confirmed by Dionysius the Areopagite, who says that the occult mysteries were conveyed by the founders of our religion *ἐκ νοῦ εἰς νοῦν διὰ μέσων λόγου*, from mind to mind, without writing, through the medium of speech.

35. In exactly the same way, when the true interpretation of the Law according to the command of God, divinely handed down to Moses, was revealed, it was called the Cabala, a word which is the same among the Hebrews as "reception" among ourselves; for this reason, of course, that one man from another, by a sort of hereditary right, received that doctrine not through written records but through a regular succession of revelations. But after the Hebrews were restored by Cyrus from the Babylonian captivity, and after the temple had been established anew under Zorobabel, they brought their attention to the restoration of the Law. Esdras, then the head of the church, after the book of Moses had been amended, when he plainly recognized that, because of the exiles, the massacres, the flights, and the captivity of the children of Israel, the custom instituted by their forefathers of transmitting the doctrine from mouth to mouth could not be preserved, and that it would come to pass that the mysteries of the heavenly teachings divinely bestowed on them would be lost, since the memory of them could not long endure without the aid of written records, decided that those of the elders then surviving should be called together and that each one should impart to the gathering whatever he possessed by personal recollection concerning the mysteries of the Law and that scribes should be employed to collect them into seventy volumes (about the number of elders in the Sanhedrin). That you may not have to rely on me alone in this matter, Fathers, hear Esdras himself speak thus: "And it came to pass, when the forty days were fulfilled, that the Most High spake unto me, saying, The first that thou hast written publish openly, and let the worthy and the unworthy read it: but keep the seventy last books, that thou mayst deliver them to such as be wise among thy people: for in them is

the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom, and the stream of knowledge. And I did so." And these are the words of Esdras to the letter.<sup>53</sup> These are the books of cabalistic lore. In these books principally resides, as Esdras with a clear voice justly declared, the spring of understanding, that is, the ineffable theology of the supersubstantial deity; the fountain of wisdom, that is, the exact metaphysic of the intellectual and angelic forms; and the stream of knowledge, that is, the most steadfast philosophy of natural things. Pope Sixtus the Fourth who last preceded the pope under whom we are now fortunate to be living, Innocent the Eighth, took the greatest pains and interest in seeing that these books should be translated into the Latin tongue for a public service to our faith, and, when he died, three of them had been done into Latin. Among the Hebrews of the present day these books are cherished with such devotion that it is permitted no man to touch them unless he be forty years of age.

36. When I had purchased these books at no small cost to myself, when I had read them through with the greatest diligence and with unwearying toil, I saw in them (as God is my witness) not so much the Mosaic as the Christian religion. There is the mystery of the Trinity, there the Incarnation of the Word, there the divinity of the Messiah; there I have read about original sin, its expiation through Christ, the heavenly Jerusalem, the fall of the devils, the orders of the angels, purgatory, and the punishments of hell, the same things we read daily in Paul and Dionysius, in Jerome and Augustine. But in those parts which concern philosophy you really seem to hear Pythagoras and Plato, whose principles are so closely related to the Christian faith that our Augustine gives immeasurable thanks to God that the books of the Platonists have come into his hands.<sup>54</sup> Taken altogether, there is absolutely no controversy between ourselves and the Hebrews on any matter, with regard to which they cannot be refuted and

53. [II Esdras 14: 5-6.]

54. [Cf. *Confessions* viii. 2.]

gainsaid out of the cabalistic books, so that there will not be even a corner left in which they may hide themselves. I have as a most weighty witness of this fact that very learned man Antonius Chronicus<sup>55</sup> who, when I was with him at a banquet, with his own ears heard Dactylus, a Hebrew trained in this lore, with all his heart agree entirely to the Christian idea of the Trinity.<sup>56</sup>

37. But let me return to surveying the chapters of my disputation. I have introduced also my own idea of the interpretation of the prophetic verses of Orpheus and Zoroaster.<sup>57</sup> Orpheus is read among the Greeks in a nearly complete text, Zoroaster only in part, though, among the Chaldaeans, in a more complete text, and both are believed to be the fathers and authors of ancient wisdom. Now, to pass over Zoroaster, the frequent mention of whom among the Platonists is never without the greatest respect, Jamblichus of Chalcis writes that Pythagoras followed the Orphic theology as the model on which he fashioned and built his own philosophy. Nay, furthermore, they say that the maxims of Pythagoras are alone called holy, because he proceeded from the principles of Orpheus; and that the secret doctrine of numbers and whatever Greek philosophy has of the great or the sublime has flowed from thence as its first font. But as was the practice of the ancient theologians, even so did Orpheus protect the mysteries of his dogmas with the coverings of fables, and conceal them with a poetic veil, so that whoever should read his hymns would suppose there was nothing beneath them beyond idle tales and perfectly unadulterated trifles. I have wished to say this so

55. [Antonio Vinciguerra, called Chronicus, a Venetian diplomat and writer (see Arnaldo della Torre, *Di Antonio Vinciguerra e delle sue Satire* [Rocca S. Casciano, 1902]).]

56. [For Dactylus, one of Pico's Jewish teachers, see U. Cassuto, *Gli Ebrei a Firenze nell'età del Rinascimento* (Florence, 1918), pp. 317-19.]

57. [For the influence of the Orphic texts in the Italian Renaissance see P. O. Kristeller, "The Scholastic Background of Marsilio Ficino," *Traditio*, II (1944), 271-72. For the influence of the Chaldaic Oracles then attributed to Zoroaster see B. Kiezkowski, *Studi sul Platonismo del Rinascimento in Italia* (Florence, 1936), pp. 34 ff. and 155 ff.]

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that it might be known what a task it was for me, how difficult it was to draw out the hidden meaning of the secrets of philosophy from the intentional tangles of riddles and from the obscurity of fables, especially since I have been aided, in a matter so serious, so abstruse, and so little known, by no toil, no application on the part of other interpreters. And yet like dogs they have barked that I have made a kind of heap of inconsequential nothings for a vain display of mere quantity, as if these were not all questions in the highest degree disputed and controversial, in which the main schools are at swords' points, and as if I had not contributed many things utterly unknown and untried to these very men who are even now tearing at my reputation and who consider that they are the leaders in philosophy. Nay, I am so far from this fault that I have taken great pains to reduce my argument to as few chapters as I could. If I myself had (after the wont of others) wished to divide it into parts and to cut it to pieces, it would undoubtedly have grown to a countless number.

38. And, to hold my peace about the rest, who is there who does not know that a single proposition of the nine hundred, the one that treats of reconciling the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, I could have developed, beyond all suspicion of my having wooed mere quantity, into six hundred, nay, more chapters, by enumerating one after the other all those points in which others consider those philosophers to differ and I, to agree? But I must certainly speak (for I shall speak, albeit neither modestly nor in conformity with my own character), since my enviers and detractors compel me to: I have wished to give assurance by this contest of mine, not so much that I know many things, as that I know things of which many are ignorant. And now, in order that this, reverend Fathers, may become manifest to you by the facts and that my oration may no longer stand in the way of your desire, excellent doctors, whom I perceive to be prepared and girded up in the expectation of the dispute, not without great delight: let us now—and may the outcome be fortunate and favorable—join battle as to the sound of a trumpet of war.

## V

PIETRO POMPONAZZI

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