Pico Della Mirandola:

Christianity, Humanism, and Esoterica

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Introduction: Humanism and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola

Humanism, as defined by Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, and others, is the belief in specific ethical norms that define the good life and guide behavior around the Aristotelian concept of the Golden Mean. As a practical philosophy, it requires self-restraint and humility from its adherents to combat their natural egoism and appetites that threaten debasement if left unchecked.[1] Yet the doctrine is not one of mere asceticism, for the humanist marries his self-control with a heroic view of human potential.[2] Man, claims the humanist, is unique among the animals as the species capable of attaining various ends, from the brutal to the beatific. It is his intelligent capacity for choice that sets man apart and determines which path he will tread, and it is therefore not wrong for him to aspire to great things, so long as his ambitions are tempered by knowledge of his true capacity.[3] Thus the humanist opposes excesses of both privation and hubris. Neither stern aesthetic nor utilitarian technocrat, the humanist hews fast to the "universal centre," exhibiting what Irving Babbitt called "poise" and Paul Elmer More, "common sense."[4] As Babbitt puts it,

> Humanism appears primarily, not in the enlargement of comprehension and sympathy, desirable though this enlargement may be, but in the act of selection, in the final

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1. Irving Babbitt, "Humanism: An Essay at Definition," in *Humanism and America: Essays on the Outlook of Modern Civilisation*, ed. Norman Foerster (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1930), 26; Russell Kirk, "The Conservative Humanism of Irving Babbitt." *Prairie Schooner* 26, no. 3 (Fall 1952): 246, 248, 251.

2. Paul Elmer More, "The Humility of Common Sense," in *Humanism and America: Essays on the Outlook of Modern Civilisation*, edited by Norman Foerster (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1930), 73.

3. Russell Kirk, Introduction to *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, 1956, Reprint, (Washington DC: Regnery Gateway, 2023): xiv-xv.

4. Babbitt, "Humanism," 28-29; More, "Humility of Common Sense," 72-74.

> imposition on mere multiplicity of values…. The model…is a constant corrective of everything that is one-sided and out of proportion.[5]

Though the roots of humanism are found in the writings of the ancient Greek philosophers, and examples of thought and practice consistent with humanism exist in the teachings of Buddha and Confucius, most twentieth and twenty-first century humanists trace the origin of the philosophy to the Italian Renaissance of 1400-1600 *anno Domini*.[6] The recovery and development of ancient learning and practice during this extended period uprooted the established order of the Middle Ages—stagnant in its hierarchical authority and distrust of innovation—replacing it with a spirit of human potential.[7] The fall of Constantinople in 1453 led to a great migration of classical Christian scholars from east to west, who settled in the universities of Italy. There, they expounded the ancient platonic and classical scholarship to students who had hitherto been steeped in the High Scholasticism of the Schoolmen.[8] Of their students, one of the first to affect the greater discourse was the young nobleman, Count Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, whose works both drew the ire of papal authority and captured the imaginations of the band of scholars that would proceed to drum in the period of the Renaissance and its experiment with humanism.[9]

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5. Babbitt, "Humanism," 30.

6. Ibid., 28-31. Unless otherwise noted, all years referenced are *anno Domini*.

7. Russell Kirk, *The Roots of the American Order*, 4th ed (Washington DC: Regnery Gateway, 2003), 224-225.

8. Ibid., 223.

9. Copenhaver, Brian, Introduction to *900 Conclusions*, by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2025), vii; Kirk, *Roots*, 224.

In his *Oration*, Pico presented the components of the philosophy that would come to be known as humanism in language grand and energetic enough to excite the reader's imagination. Published in its entirety in 1496—two years posthumous—its opening salvo so excellently expounded the concept of human potential that the title of the entire work was subsequently altered to reflect it, and has thereafter been known as the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. Under this title, the *Oration* became, as Russell Kirk asserted, "the manifesto of humanism," in which Pico promoted the excellence of man's potential as understood under Christian theology, which served to energize its expression and temper its excesses.[10]

Though descriptive of the interest that has motivated most of its readers in the years since its publication, this amended title has been criticized by some scholars for ignoring the themes contained within the *Oration*'s second half, and not without merit. For young Pico composed the *Oration* as an apology rather than a broadside for a new philosophy.[11] Pico had planned to deliver his *Oration* as an opening address for a grand public symposium of scholars from across Italy, who were to have assembled in Rome in 1487 at his request and expense.[12] The debate was to have as its subject another of his works, the *900 Conclusions*, an eclectic list of theses drawn from the available wisdom of Latin, Greek, Arabian, Hebrew, Egyptian, and Chaldean

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10. Caponigri, A. Robert, Translator's Note to *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, 1956, Reprint, (Washington DC: Regnery Gateway, 2023): vii-viii; Kirk, Introduction to *Oration*: xiv-xvi.

11. Caponigri, Translator's Note to *Oration*: viii; Hughes, Philip, "Pico Della Mirandola: 1463-1494: A Study of an Intellectual Pilgrimage (continued from last issue)," *Philosophia Reformata* 23, no. 4 (1958): 171, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24706090.

12. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *900 Conclusions*, edited and translated by Brian Copenhaver, I Tati Renaissance Library, edited by James Hankins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2025): 172-173; Brian Copenhaver, Notes to the Translation to *900 Conclusions*, by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2025), endnote 946.

philosophers and sages, from within Christendom and from without. Much as Origen had once famously advised Gregory to make use of his pagan Greek philosophy in his study of scripture (recalling the Children of Israel's use of the spoils of pagan Egypt to build and outfit God's temple), so had Pico in his studies scoured the philosophy and mysticism of the known world for meaning, regardless of explicitly Christian origin.[13] In *900 Conclusions*, the young firebrand expressed his enthusiasm for the Catholic faith by attempting to develop a *concordia* of all learning under its umbrella, which would unify the various philosophical and mystical traditions and demonstrate how their seeming contradictions could be satisfied.[14] Pico was convinced that he had come to understand the unifying principles that would permit such a *concordia* to be developed, and thus ended the *900 Conclusions* with an invitation for all comers to travel at his expense to Rome and debate his conclusions with him, eventually culminating—he was sure—in their vindication.[15]

Pico's *Oration* is an apology for the scope, novelty, and daring of his endeavor, for in it he seems to be aware of the kinds of criticism his great project is likely to draw from the established thinkers of pre-Renaissance Italy. In the second half of the oration, Pico addresses these concerns directly, arguing with his potential interlocutors against charges that he is merely an amateur philosopher, that the scope and number of his conclusions are far too expansive for a freshman effort, and that the source material for his conclusions is too unusual to be acceptable

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13. Origen, *Letter to Gregory*, Ante-Nicene Christian Library, Vol. 9, Translated by Allan Menzies, 1885, Reprint (Albany OR: AGES Software, 1997).

14. Copenhaver, Introduction to *900 Conclusions*: xiv.

15. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, translated by A. Robert Caponigri, 1956, Reprint, (Washington DC: Regnery Gateway, 2023): 52-53, 64; Hughes "Pico Della Mirandola," 177.

to Catholicism.[16] This knowledge recontextualizes the first half of the *Oration* also, for it is now understood to be—at its core—a positive justification for his grand philosophical adventure. Rather than attempting to establish a new school of thought and practice, Pico's opening in the *Oration* is a careful explanation of his motivation for his project. The fact that, in explaining this, he expressed ideas that would launch a new age in Europe and the entire learned world is testament to his innate enthusiasm, persuasive genius, and the strength of the many lessons he had been taught in fifteenth-century Italy.[17]

Ignorant of the future impact of his *Oration*, Pico was convinced that it was his *900 Conclusions* that would be of transformative influence.[18] Arriving in Rome in 1486 ahead of his expected triumph, Pico had copies of his *900 Conclusions* printed and sent to the seats of learning throughout Italy, his bold offer to debate any and all who would travel to his symposium plainly printed at the end of the pamphlet.[19] One copy was even sent to Pope Innocent VIII for his blessing, dutifully stating within it that,

> …I propose nothing as asserted or acceptable except insofar as the Most Holy Roman Church – with its well-deserving head, Innocent VIII, the Supreme Pontiff, to whose judgment only a mindless person does not submit his own mind's judgement – judges it either true or acceptable.[20]

Pico's triumph, however, would not come to pass during his lifetime. His philosophical enemies

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16. Pico della Mirandola, *Oration*, 34-69.

17. Ibid., 1-34.

18. Hughes "Pico Della Mirandola," 165-166.

19. Pico della Mirandola, *900 Conclusions*, 172-173.

20. Ibid., 68-71

did not accept his offer, and the Pope, though initially receiving his wealthy and learned guest warmly, was moved by their complaints to turn the *900 Conclusions* over to a commission of examiners to determine whether Pico's conclusions were in fact heretical.[21] Any scholars who might have accepted the young nobleman's offer were therefore dissuaded from participation, all the more so when the examining commission returned with its verdict in 1487: thirteen of the *Conclusions*, covering topics like the Eucharist, Christ's incarnation, the finite nature of divine punishment, the eternal destiny of the early church father Origen, and the potential use of magic and the mystical Jewish study of Kabbalah to prove the divinity of Christ, were ruled to be either "heretical or savour[ing] of heresy."[22] As he had promised to do, Pico recanted these thirteen conclusions but, in the true humanistic spirit, immediately wrote over the course of twenty days his massive *Apology*, explaining his thirteen condemned theses and arguing that they were not heretical but merely misunderstood. This proved a step too far, leading Innocent VIII to issue a papal bull in 1487 banning the production and reading of *900 Conclusions*.[23] Though his successor, Pope Alexander VI, annulled Innocent VIII's papal bull six years later in 1493, the cowed nobleman Pico had since turned his interests away from disputation and toward the evangelism of Savonarola, "the fanatic preacher of repentance," in the service of which he died

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21. Hughes "Pico Della Mirandola," 165.

22. Innocent VIII, "Damnatio nonnullarum propositionum Ioannis Pici, comitis Concordiae, cum inhibition illas imprimendi ac legendi, sub poena excomunicationis," in *Bullarum diplomatum et privilegiorun sanctorum Romanorum Pontificum: Taurinensis edition locupletior facta collection novissima pluriusm brevium, epistolarum, decretorum actorumque S. Sedis a S. Leone Magnus usque ad praesens* (Vatican City: Vatican Archives, 1857), 327-328. https://archive.org/details/bullarumdiplomat05cath/; Hughes "Pico Della Mirandola," 167; Pico della Mirandola, *900 Conclusions*, conclusions 548, 559, 571, 580, 583, 584, 588, 589, 590, 599, 773, 779, 780; Copenhaver, Notes to the Translation to *900 Conclusions*, endnotes 585, 596, 609, 618, 621, 622, 626, 627, 628, 637, 816, 822, 823.

23. Innocent VIII, "Damnatio," 528; Hughes, "Pico Della Mirandola," 167-168, 171.

of fever a year later.[24]

Though both Renaissance-era and modern humanists discovered in Pico's *Oration* motivation for their own struggles toward rightly fulfilling their potential as men, the work must be understood for the purpose it was intended: to justify consideration of the *900 Conclusions*, their wide-ranging, obscure, arcane, and potentially heretical statements notwithstanding. This may cause the new humanist of Irving Babbitt's ilk no minor concern, as the humanistic enthusiasm of the first part of the *Oration* is notably absent from the *900 Conclusions*.[25] In fact, it seems reasonable to question how a humanist devoted to the "universal centre" should consider his philosophical forebearer Pico's flamboyant challenge to the *status quo* of the time. The faithful Christian humanist may likewise consider Pico's embrace of numerology, magic, and Kabbalah as troubling portents. The story of Pico della Mirandola's downfall seems to suggest that the humanist is prone to destroy himself in its own hubris, by failing to distinguish error from truth and by flying, in complete assurance of his own powers, too close to the sun.

A proper reading of the *900 Conclusions* and the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, however, does not support these concerns, despite the unhappy turn Pico's life took upon publishing the former. Though his works reflect both a fascination with obscure religious practices and ideas that strain the limits of orthodoxy, they also describe a humanism inseparable from Christianity. Ultimately, Pico's works demonstrate a method by which the devout Christian might engage in the humanistic pursuit with his faith intact, surviving any errors he may make along the way. The method begins with an understanding of the role of religion in humanism,

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24. Kirk, *Roots*, 227; Hughes, "Pico Della Mirandola," 168.

25. Copenhaver, Introduction to *900 Conclusions*, xv.

and its utility in maintaining devotion to the "universal centre." Then, Pico's *900 Conclusions* will be analyzed to understand its themes that undergird the humanistic considerations of the *Oration*: the nature of man, his potential, his limits, and his proper aspiration within the cosmos. Finally, the issue of Pico's tendency toward mysticism and arcane learning will be considered, both to contextualize it and to apply its lessons to the present day.

Religion and Humanism

The Necessity of Religion in Humanism

Related to but separate from the humanism that energized the Italian Renaissance in the fifteenth century is the new humanism of the twentieth century. While new humanism welcomed such men as T. S. Eliot and Russell Kirk as some of its most vocal proponents, the movement was founded upon the shoulders of two men whose writings clarified the philosophy for the modern world: Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More. Babbitt, a professor at Harvard University in the early twentieth century, tirelessly espoused humanism as a way of life by which a man might successfully navigate the modern world as a man, neither following his appetites to vanquish his distinction with nature, nor his ego to challenge his distinction with the Almighty, but rather subject to laws that, when followed, keep him in his proper sphere, fulfilled and growing.[26] While Babbitt's work was primarily intended for the academy, More, his contemporary and friend, brought new humanism to the popular mind through his literary criticism in journalistic

26. Norman Foerster, Preface to *Humanism and America: Essays on the Outlook of Modern Civilisation* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1930), vii; Russell Kirk, "The Enduring Influence of Irving Babbitt," in *Irving Babbitt in Our Time*, edited by George Panichas and Claes Ryn (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1986): 21.

organs like the New York *Evening Post*, the *Nation*, and the *Independent*, though possessing no less formidable an intellect. More and Babbitt differed on several major points in their new humanism, chief amongst them being More's belief in the necessity of transcendent grace as an intuitive corrector guiding the strident humanist away from error, a conviction Babbitt did not share.[27] Yet, Babbitt's humanism did not insist upon agnosticism,

> For my own part, I range myself unhesitatingly on the side of the supernaturalists, Though I see no evidence humanism is necessarily ineffective apart from dogmatic and revealed religion, there is, as it seems to me, evidence that it gains immensely in effectiveness when it has a background of religious insight.[28]

Babbitt's objections to a humanism founded upon transcendent grace were entirely practical. In his time, he had seen humanistic philosophy embraced by Christian, Confucian, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Atheist alike, and did not wish to limit its scope unnecessarily to a particular religion or even to the realm of the theist.[29] For Babbitt, new humanism was an "endeavor to renew mind and conscience" and must therefore accept all comers gladly, though such a secular humanism potentially left unsolved the question of where the internal and personal check on excess would derive.[30] While More and other new humanists insisted that religion in the form of transcendent grace was the only means for obtaining this internal check,[31] Babbitt disagreed,

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27. Foerster, Preface to *Humanism and America*, vii-viii; Russell Kirk, "P.E. More on Aristocracy," *Man and State* 2, no. 6 (Summer, 1964), 6; Russell Kirk, "The Principles of Paul Elmer More," *The Church Quarterly Review* 154 (October/December, 1953): 429; Babbitt, "Humanism," 37-38.

28. Babbitt, "Humanism," 39.

29. Ibid., 48-49.

30. Kirk, "Enduring Influence," 19.

31. Kirk, "Principles of Paul Elmer More," 430; Eliot, Thomas Stearns, "Religion Without Humanism," in *Humanism and America: Essays on the Outlook of Modern Civilisation*, edited by Norman Foerster (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1930), 107.

> …[T]he individual who is practicing humanistic control is really subordinating to the part of himself which he possesses in common with other men, that part of himself which is driving him apart from them. If several individuals submit to the same or a similar humanistic discipline, they will…move toward a communion. A group that is thus getting together on a sound ethical basis will be felt at once as an element of social order and stability.[32]

Babbitt goes on to write that "a still more perfect communion" is achievable through religion, but that, when calling men of various traditions together to renew their mind and consciences, social communion would have to suffice.[33]

The writing of these two new humanists, though hardly dry and dull, did not ascend to the rhetorical heights of Pico's *Oration*, nor were these proponents of new humanism as given as their fifteenth-century paragon to exclamations of mankind's excellence. "Humanism is not primarily enthusiastic, whereas religion is," noted Babbitt as he attempted to define each separately, "It must be admitted that even a true religious enthusiasm is hard to combine with poise…"[34] Pico, however, is a whirling dervish of enthusiasm, driven by religious fervor to his life of philosophical study, and to the derivation, publishing, and attempted defense of his *900 Conclusions*. In his *Oration*, Pico—justifying his great endeavor—places man in a position unparalleled in creation,

> God the Father, the Mightiest Architect, had already raised, according to the precepts of his hidden wisdom, this world we see, the cosmic dwelling of divinity, a temple most august. He had already adorned the supercelestial region with Intelligences, infused the heavenly globes with the life of immortal souls and set the fermenting dung-heap of the inferior world teeming with every form of animal life. But when this work was done, the Divine Artificer still longed for some creature which might comprehend the meaning of so vast an achievement, which might be moved with love at its beauty and smitten with

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32. Babbitt, "Humanism," 49.

33. Ibid., 49.

34. Ibid., 41-42.

> awe at its grandeur. When, consequently, all else had been completed…in the very last place, He bethought Himself of bringing forth man.[35]

He continues by imagining God imbuing man with a special capacity separate from that of the angels and the beasts,

> "The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains…. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine."[36]

Pico believes it is within the capacity of man, by his choices and actions, to so develop his intellect that it may approach angelic wisdom, and that, with this potential so revealed, man has a duty to so choose and so act,

> …[S]ince we have been born into this condition of being what we choose to be—that we ought to be sure above else that it may never be said against us that, born to a high position, we failed to appreciate it, but fell instead to the estate of brutes and uncomprehending beasts of burden…and finally that we may not, through abuse of the generosity of a most indulgent Father, pervert the free option which He has given us from a saving to a damning gift.[37]

As to what choices a man should make to ensure he attains such a lofty ambition, Pico uses the examples of the heavenlies to develop a guide,

> The Seraphim burns with the fire of charity; from the Cherubim flashes forth the splendor of intelligence; the Throne stands firm with the fullness of justice. If consequently, in the pursuit of the active life we govern inferior things by just criteria, we shall be established in the firm position of the Thrones. If, freeing ourselves from active care, meditating upon the Creator in His work, and the work in its Creator, we shall be resplendent with

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35. Pico della Mirandola, *Oration*, 5.

36. Ibid., 7-8.

37. Ibid., 12.

> the light of the Cherubim. If we burn with love for the Creator only, His consuming fire will quickly transform us into the flaming likeness of the Seraphim.[38]

Pico goes on to state the particulars of his educational program: moral philosophy to overcome one's brutish tendencies; dialectic, to overcome one's internal strife; natural philosophy, to pass undisturbed through the cacophony of opinions and ideas that surround us; and theology, to expose to our intellects those ideas for contemplation that result in knowledge of the divine.[39] He concludes that, with such a great potential available to him, he was obliged to study philosophy to truly honor God, and to present his conclusions for public disputation,

> …[N]ot because I am ignorant of my own weaknesses. Rather, it is because I understand that in this kind of learned contest the real victory lies in being vanquished.[40]

Pico's enthusiasm for his great endeavor is therefore founded upon similar principles to those of the new humanists, for Pico was following what he perceived to be the law for man, while abnegating the law for beasts, and refusing to dishonor God by failing to seek his potential to the best of his ability. Though his flash and confidence makes it difficult to see, Pico's great energy was at least partially motivated by a high view of God and, therefore, was guided by an internal guide of transcendent grace like More described. His humility (not overwhelming, perhaps, but present) was evidenced by his desire to not simply present his conclusions but to defend them and run the risk of being shown to be wrong. Pico understood that such a result would be no

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38. Pico della Mirandola, *Oration*, 13-14.

39. Ibid., 20-21.

40. Ibid., 41.

failure but would instead move him further down his path toward reaching his high potential for the glory of God.

Pico's reaction to his great symposium being blocked by political and religious opposition is likewise illustrative. Unable to accept that his ideas had been dismissed without having been subjected to a true trial, and had been found wanting out of what he perceived were erroneous conclusions and political motivations, Pico wrote his *Apology* to explain why his condemned conclusions were actually acceptable, and why so many notable men were opposing him.[41] Drawing his justification for action not from the majesty of the papal authority but from belief in his divinely-ordained calling to fulfill his great potential—and perhaps a naïve assumption, common to youth, that he could get his superiors to understand if he might only be allowed to *explain*—Pico essentially composed his own arrest warrant in his *Apology*, which led to the formal condemnation of the entirety of the *900 Conclusions* and the beginning of his life as a man in legal jeopardy, a status that continued for the next six years.[42] Though it is impossible to say for sure, it may be concluded that Pico would hardly have endeavored and withstood so much if he were motivated by anything other than the transcendent grace that convinced him there was no other path he could justly follow.

The Necessity of Humanism in Religion

Pico's *Apology*, in addition to being an unintentional self-condemnation, serves to illustrate another important point that often goes overlooked in modern discussions of humanism:

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41. Hughes, "Pico Della Mirandola," 171-181.

42. Innocent VIII, "Damnatio," 528; Hughes, "Pico Della Mirandola," 167-168, 171.

the role of the humanist within religion as one who brings forth renewal. As T. S. Eliot observed in 1930,

> Religion without humanism produces the vulgarities and the political compromises of Roman Catholicism; the vulgarities and the fanaticism of Tennessee; it produces Mrs. MacPherson; and it produces liberal uplift; and it produces the Bishop of Birmingham….[R]eligion without humanism produces the opposite and conflicting types of religious bigotry (liberalism in religion is a form of bigotry)….Without humanism, both religion and science tend to become other than themselves, and without religion and science—without emotional and intellectual discipline—humanism tends to shrink into an atrophied caricature of itself.[43]

One need not understand each reference to grasp his point. Someone must exist in the church and the laboratory to help the theologian and scientist understand when their investigations are becoming absurd. When the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or the Southern Baptist Convention take actions that place the hierarchical organization ahead of the people they are intended to serve, it is the humanist within their ranks that will draw them both back to the Golden Mean of eschewing extremes.[44] In the church, this is particularly important, since the nature of man corporately and individually—as *imago Dei*—grants him a certain dignity that all Christians are called to respect.[45]

In this way, Pico's *Apology* may be seen as a corrective on the over-encumbering Roman hierarchy of the time. Pico and his friends believed the papal opposition he endured was due in no small part to the action of other scholars who did not wish to debate him out of fear than in doing so, their own intellectual lack of rigor might be exposed. Regardless of whether this was

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43. Eliot, "Religion without Humanism," 107-108.

44. Ibid., 113.

45. Gen. 1:27; Matt. 22:36-40.

true, Pico was by all accounts condemned by Innocent VIII for arguing on behalf of his heretical conclusions rather than simply accepting their unacceptability.[46] Whether the Church would have been better served to have a method at the ready by which a respectful parishioner might challenge what he considered an erroneous action by the Church is unclear. With Martin Luther and his *95 Theses* a mere thirty years hence, it is perhaps instructive to consider how the Church might have faired had the young German monk had more direct and effective recourse within its hierarchy, and whether a commitment to the systematic embrace of the dignity of each parishioner might have provided it.[47]

Having now explored at some depth Pico's humanism and its implications for modern humanism's relationship with religion, it is important to briefly consider the theological and philosophical foundations of it. Pico's high view of human potential arose from somewhere; what follows is an attempt to explore the *900 Conclusions* as a foundation for his beliefs.

The Humanistic Foundation of the *900 Conclusions*

The humanism of Pico della Mirandola is based upon human potential understood within a solidly Christian foundation. Though Pico's succinct expression of this humanism is in his *Oration*, it is founded upon conclusions that he drafted during the wide-ranging studies that resulted in the publication of his *900 Conclusions*. Though the purpose of the *Conclusions* was to propose a *concordia* of all extant thought under the auspices of the Church, and was therefore

46. Hughes, "Pico Della Mirandola," 166.

47. Ibid., 170-171.

not explicitly a humanistic effort,[48] the *Conclusions* contain many statements that express how Pico viewed humanity, and that support many of the points he made in his *Oration on Human Dignity*.

Among the *900 Conclusions*, over one hundred address the nature of humanity itself. Analysis of these along with the *Oration on the Dignity of Man* reveal four themes: 1) the innate greatness of humanity, 2) the extent of human capacity, 3) freedom of choice, 4) and the errors and limitations of humanity. Each of these will be examined in order.

The Innate Greatness of Humanity: The *Imago Dei*

As Pico makes clear in his *Oration*, man is great because God created him to be great.[49] Moses reiterates this when he reveals in Genesis that man is made in the image of God.[50] Being made in God's image, man has certain abilities that beasts lack, like the ability to contemplate his own actions as an intelligence[51] and to appreciate beauty more perfectly than beasts, for:

> Beauty is found more fulfilled and truer in intelligibles than in sensories.[52]

Increased capacity for thought and beauty are only the start of the implications for man as, in Conclusions 585 and 32, Pico suggests the incarnation of Christ as a man reveals even more about human nature,

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48. Copenhaver, Introduction to *900 Conclusions*: xiv.

49. Pico della Mirandola, *Oration*, 7-8.

50. Gen. 1:27.

51. Pico della Mirandola, *900 Conclusions*, conclusion 205.

52. Ibid., conclusion 619.

> Had Adam not sinned, God would have been incarnated but not crucified,[53]

And,

> At the Last Judgment, Christ will judge not only *in a* human nature but also *according to* human nature.[54]

In these, the incarnation of Christ is presented as an integral part of the divine plan for creation. That Jesus will use human traits, like compassion, to judge the world, also supports this high view of man. Here, Pico demonstrates the necessary inversion in God's incarnation: that God originally created man in his image, then took on the nature of man to fulfill his divine plan. God has clearly intended an elevated sphere for humanity from the very creation of the world, Pico would argue.

The Extent of Human Capacity

Though man is made by God in his very image, he is not created at the fullness of his capacity. The Creator proclaimed,

> I am the LORD; I change not,[55]

but he created man to change from birth, establishing his life as a constant journey of change. Man is always growing, learning, choosing, regretting, and achieving. Man can take an idea and set it into motion,[56] and so organize his thoughts and actions toward a chosen goal, regulating it

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53. Pico della Mirandola, *900 Conclusions*, conclusion 585.

54. Ibid., conclusion 32.

55. Mal. 3:6.

56. Pico della Mirandola, *900 Conclusions*, conclusion 87.

through his disposition.[57] Thus, all to which we set our minds becomes practical. This includes seemingly ethereal things like theology, for the moment a man seeks to understand theology it becomes practical,[58] for it helps him aspire to,

> [a] human's highest good [which] is fulfillment through theoretical ways of knowing.[59]

According to Pico, this human bent toward the practical is better than even the highest theoretical consideration, for it is in our actions that we achieve our goals and, therefore, fulfillment from theory to fact.[60]

Should a human wish to aspire to the highest heights available to him, Pico provides some guidance on what goal to consider setting,

> Utmost human happiness comes when our particular mind is fully joined with the first and total Mind,[61]

and,

> We ascend to a wise, beautiful and good Lord through intellect, love, and faith,[62]

and,

> Just as faith which is belief is below knowledge, so faith which is truly faith is

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57. Pico della Mirandola, *900 Conclusions*, conclusions 440-443.

58. Ibid., conclusion 446.

59. Ibid., conclusion 171.

60. Ibid., conclusion 545.

61. Ibid., conclusion 233.

62. Ibid., conclusion 313.

> supersubstantially above knowledge and Intellect, conjoining us directly with God.[63]

To set the goal to know God, to put that goal into action, and then to succeed in being joined with him is Pico's concept of the highest extent of human capacity. As he wrote in the *Oration*,

> And if, dissatisfied with the lot of all creatures, he should recollect himself into the center of his own unity, he will there become one spirit with God, in the solitary darkness of the Father, Who is set above all things, himself transcend all creatures.[64]

Likewise, as stated in conclusion 439,

> …our blessedness lies in an act of intellect that turns back.[65]

For Pico, the human intellect is highest of our capacities and the avenue by which we know God. Thus, the people we become are based upon the choices we make in developing our intellects. If a man chooses to aspire to the greatest extent of his capacity, he is in fact aspiring to join his particular but common intellect to the great central Intellect, which can be done without losing his own distinctive personality.[66] In this way,

> [b]lessedness is essentially an act of intellect,[67]

and we learn to "recollect [ourselves] into the center of our own unity" by contemplating the goals we will set and the practical steps we will take to achieve them.

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63. Pico della Mirandola, *900 Conclusions*, conclusion 314.

64. Pico della Mirandola, *Oration*, 9.

65. Pico della Mirandola, *900 Conclusions*, conclusion 439.

66. Ibid., conclusions 117-119, 132, 207.

67. Ibid., conclusion 28.

Freedom of Choice

In the great debate between determinism and freedom, Pico—as a good humanist should—chooses the side of freedom,

> Oh unsurpassed generosity of God the Father, Oh wondrous and unsurpassable felicity of man, to whom it is granted to have what he choose, to be what he wills to be![68]

For Pico, God has chosen to permit man to select his fate through his choices and actions. So may a man ascend to share in the intellectual heights of the heavenlies, or descend to the level of a brute, subject to punishment from within and without. For,

> Freedom as a whole is in reason essentially,[69]

claims Pico in conclusion 44, though he establishes an important limitation to this intellectual freedom in conclusion 588,

> [J]ust as no one has an opinion that something is thus and so exactly because he wants to have that opinion, so no one believes that something is true exactly because he wants to believe it is true. Corollary: It's not in a person's free power to believe an article of faith to be true when he pleases and to believe that it's false when it pleases him.[70]

Thus, a man is free to choose his actions, but not his beliefs. He comes to believe something to be true when he is convinced, making faith a matter of intellect rather than will. Thus, it is in his effort that he can earn eternal glory, as God sets contingent futures for each man as perfectly within his will, then gives grace to those who chose the better path.[71]

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68. Pico della Mirandola, *Oration*, 8.

69. Pico della Mirandola, *900 Conclusions*, conclusion 44.

70. Ibid., conclusion 588.

71. Ibid., conclusions 20-25.

The Errors and Limitations of Humanity

When Pico limits man, it is either in comparison to God as the greater, or in reference to the human tendency for brutality that he warns against in the *Oration*.[72] In conclusion 33, for example, he indicates that God cannot transmit the ability to create to one of his creatures, therefore limiting man to reworking the creation of God, but not permitting him to make something truly new.[73]

More is said about man's tendency toward brutality. In conclusion 354, Pico lists the states of human existence that are to be avoided for the man who wishes to reach his heavenly potential,

> Within each person are ten that punish: ignorance, grief, incontinence, desire, injustice, debauchery, jealousy, fraud, wrath, malice.[74]

Not entirely satisfied with this list, Pico adds two consecutive warnings against erotic love in conclusions 647 and 648, which,

> [i]s not happiness but impulse and frenzy—rousing, driving and pushing toward happiness,[75]

and,

> [I]t's clear to one who pays careful attention that there is no happiness in the act of love.[76]

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72. Pico della Mirandola, *Oration*, 8.

73. Pico della Mirandola, *900 Conclusions*, conclusion 33.

74. Ibid., conclusion 354.

75. Ibid., conclusion 647.

76. Ibid., conclusion 648.

To spend one's time subject to the "ten that punish" or in mindless pursuit of erotic love, which strives toward happiness but does not deliver, is not the way of human excellence, Pico suggests.

Pico's inspiring *Oration on the Dignity of Man* was based on years of study that led the young nobleman to conclusions that motivated him to attempt extraordinary things. The extensive nature of his *900 Conclusions* provides a summary of the lessons Pico learned and the implications he drew from this expansive scholarship, yet also reveals the frailty of Pico's humanity, for he was prone to uncritical enthusiasm, evidenced by his tendency to delve into obscure texts that captured his imagination in spite of their arcane contents, in search of hidden knowledge that would transform society. These esoterica will be explored next.

Obscura and Error in Humanistic Pursuits

In the *900 Conclusions*, Pico della Mirandola explored the works of all the philosophers available to him, including those that raised the eyebrows of his contemporaries and of many moderns as well. Pico showed considerable interest in the esoterica that existed around the margins of the established intellectual world of the fifteenth century. His insatiable intellectual appetite led him to eagerly devour all available primary sources and translations, sometimes under the tutelage of learned scholars and sometimes alone.[77] As a result, nearly one-third of the conclusions in Pico's *900 Conclusions* are related to magic, astrology, numerology, and Kabbalah.[78]

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77. Copenhaver, Introduction to *900 Conclusions*, xii.

78. Pico della Mirandola, *900 Conclusions*.

To our modern eyes, it can be hard to understand how an ostensibly devoted parishioner of the Church and believer in the dignity of man would dabble in the occult, yet careful consideration can yield some useful insights. The time in which Pico and others like him operated was unlike the present day in many ways that can be challenging to understand. Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton had yet to publish or, in some cases, to be born. Science itself was neither conceptually nor practically what one thinks of today. The modern dichotomy between enlightened progressive and unenlightened traditionalist did not yet exist. All the battle lines were different than what modern readers are used to. As C. S. Lewis observes,

> The conflict between the magician and the astrologer seems very surprising to those of us who want to impose our modern grouping on the men of the past; for by our grouping magic and astrology go together as 'superstitions'. But the moment we drop our grouping (which is from the historical point of view irrelevant and accidental) and try to see these two arts as they appeared to their exponents, the thing becomes perfectly simple. Magic and astrology, though of course often mixed in practice, are in tendency opposed. The magician asserts human omnipotence; the astrologer, human impotence….The thorough-going astrologer is a determinist. He holds the creed…of the 'tough-minded'. He shatters the illusions and despises the exciting hopes of the magician.[79]

Pico dedicates nearly eighty of his conclusions to magical topics, mainly gathered in conclusions 772 to 828. It is vital, however, that the reader understand the distinction between demonic and neutral magic in the eyes of Pico and the people of the time. As he states in Conclusions 772 through 774,

> All the magic that's in use by moderns – and that the Church rightly banishes – has no stability, no basis and no truth because it depends on the might of enemies of the primal Truth, of powers of *this darkness* who spread dark falsehoods in minds disposed to wickedness,

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79. Lewis, Clive Staples, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*, Oxford History of English Literature, edited by F. P. Wilson and Bonamy Dobrée (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1944), 5-6.

and,

> Natural magic is lawful and not forbidden, and I propose conclusions given below following my own opinion about general theoretical foundations of this knowledge,

and,

> Magic is a practical part of natural knowledge.[80]

What the translator calls "natural magic" is what Lewis refers to as *magia* or high magic, and the forbidden magic of Conclusion 772 as *goeteia*.[81] It is of the former type that Pico states in the *Apology*,

> This beneficent magic…does not itself work miracles, so much as sedulously serve nature as she works her wonders.[82]

With the resurgence of platonic study in the early Renaissance came fresh consideration of this high magic (which was also found in antique sources like the Orphic hymns[83]), with the same enthusiasm for renewing the long-lost noble arts driving both. In this, Pico was—if not exactly in the mainline of thought for his day—at least not alone, for several of his contemporaries also studied and espoused a return to high magic.[84]

Pico's fascination with numerology may be considered similarly to his interest in high magic. Ancient texts outlining the precepts of numerology were also discovered among the

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80. Pico della Mirandola, *900 Conclusions*, conclusions 772-774.

81. Lewis, *English Literature*, 5, 8.

82. Pico della Mirandola, *Oration*, 57.

83. Pico della Mirandola, *900 Conclusions*, conclusions 798-828.

84. Lewis, *English Literature*, 9.

Platonists, to be restored along with the rest of their esoterica. The fact that Pico claimed to be able to use this numerology to, among other things, demonstrate the existence and nature of God[85] and of the trinity[86] shows that, in his mind, the method was analogous to philosophy and could be used similarly to arrive at conclusions that supported orthodoxy. Likewise, Pico's interest in Kabbalah was born from its ostensible application to trinitarian theology, which he breathlessly discovered upon reading translations of the Kabbalistic books. Being a zealot for the Church, Pico seems to have devised a scheme through which he would finally bridge the divide between the Jewish and Christian faiths buy proving the core elements of Christianity to the Jews using their own mystical Kabbalah.[87]

The fact that Pico's investigations into *magia*, the orphic hymns, numerology, and Kabbalah eventually proved fruitless does not imply they were necessarily wicked, though Lewis does suggest that the promise of unlocking the hidden power of nature in *magia* may have motivated Pico's view of the nearly angelic potential of man.[88] Though such thoughts do smell slightly of Babel, the modern philosopher inclined to sneer at Pico as a simple primitive may find his contemporary analogue in the modern technocrat and his desire to remake the world in a silicon image, perhaps encouraging him to note his own age's similarities with the young Count and take warning from his excesses.

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85. Pico della Mirandola, *900 Conclusions*, conclusions 683-687.

86. Ibid., conclusions 707, 722.

87. Copenhaver, Introduction to *900 Conclusions*, xv.

88. Lewis, *English Literature*, 13.

Conclusion

Count Giovannii Pico della Mirandola's *900 Conclusions* collectively reflect a philosophical confidence of Christian belief as the vital force energizing humanism, sufficient to accommodate, transform, and redeem even the most esoteric considerations. Though the *900 Conclusions* is not a work of humanist philosophy, many of the theses contained within it deal with the subject of man, providing a foundation Pico's more abiding work, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, which expressed the high view of man that animated the Italian Renaissance.[89] In the *900 Conclusions*, Pico sees man as created by God in his own image, endowed by him with a measure of the same intelligence that God perfectly embodies, and granted—by divine writ—freedom to obey or disobey God. Pico therefore presents the foundation for his assertion in the *Oration* that the highest good of man is to develop his intellectual gift to perfection.[90] Pico's philosophy requires the source of this excellence to be divinity, as his humanism exists within the framework of humble devotion to God—the First Intellect— and that the human intellect can attain to its particular greatness by joining with him.[91] The excesses of the Italian Renaissance and the modern world reflect a tendency to make man the end of all things, rather than the greatest of all the Creator's works.[92] In this reading, Pico can be seen as the colleague of Kirk and Elliot and More, who believe humanism requires a belief in the transcendent to provide the internal check against excess. Pico's example demonstrates how Christian humanism provides

89. Kirk, Introduction to *Oration*, xv-xvii.

90. Pico della Mirandola, *Oration*, 7-8.

91. Kirk, Introduction to *Oration*, xiv-xvi.

92. Ibid., xvi-xvii.

the organization and meaning sought by the ideologically restless and ambitious man, seeking to develop himself to his highest potential. Thus, Pico's fascination with religious obscura and arcana, though heterodox, may be considered forgivable, for his high view of humanity as a species made in God's image reflected a high and essentially orthodox view of God. Perhaps one with such a high view of God cannot wander far astray.

The parable of the wise and foolish man is instructive here, for it teaches that foundation is key. Pico had a firm foundation in the greatness of God and the dignity of man, reflecting the two greatest commandments, and thus his intellectual errors were not fatal to the standing of his intellectual house.[93] Pico is an archetype by virtue of being first: he represents the questioning humanist within the Christian context, confident in his ability, founded in the *imago Dei* and the incarnation, and understanding his purpose well despite his errors. In a modern world of competing theologies, philosophies, gurus, and appetites, the individual who wishes to set his feet to a solid path could do worse than to look to Pico for an example.

93. Matt. 7:24-27; 22:36-40.

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