

PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA



1463 -- 1494

by

PHILIP EDGCUMBE HUGHES

A brief summary of the contents

The University of Cape Town

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PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA: Summary.

Pico della Mirandola was born of noble Italian parentage on 24 February 1463. From early childhood he showed himself to be possessed of quite exceptional gifts of intellect and personality. At the age of fourteen he was sent by his mother to Bologna with a view to his being trained for holy orders; but after two years there, during which he achieved the considerable task of compiling a compendium of all papal decretals, he turned his back on the Church as a career.

During the next six years (1479-1485) his travels took him to Ferrara, Padua, Florence, Perugia, and Paris. In these places he studied under and made friends with the leading scholars of the day, including such notable men as Lorenzo de' Medici, Angelo Poliziano, Marsilio Ficino, Ermolao Barbaro, and Domenico Benèvièni. He conceived the grand project of demonstrating the harmony of all systems of philosophy and theology.

During his first visit to Paris, in 1485, he learnt to respect the direct Parisian ~~style~~ literary style as opposed to the more ornate and superficial Italian style - as is shown in his letter written to Ermolao Barbaro in the middle of that year from Florence.

A life of distinction in public affairs lay open to a man of his birth and talents, but his resolute preference was for the secluded life of contemplation and scholarship - as is shown in his letter written to Andrea Corneo in October of the following year from Perugia.

One of the most important and formative of his friendships was that with Girolamo Savonarola, whom he met for the first ~~time~~<sup>time</sup> in 1482, and <sup>who</sup> exercised an increasing influence on his life and outlook.

Even in these early years Pico showed himself by his letters and other writings to be a fluent and effective writer of Latin and able to quote readily from a wide knowledge of the classical and ecclesiastical authors. His extensive studies covered Plato and Aristotle, the Roman classics, the Church Fathers and the Schoolmen, and also the Oriental languages, Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic. His Oriental studies were undertaken with a view to the investigation of the secret Jewish tradition known as the Cabala. His pioneering enthusiasm for the Christian interpretation of the Cabala was passed on to other scholars of his day, who set themselves to the study of Hebrew for this purpose. Most famous of his followers in this respect was Johann Reuchlin who became the leading Hebraist of his day and taught the Hebrew language to many eager students. Thus the reflorescence of Hebrew studies in the sixteenth century was due primarily to Pico's confident claim that the principal doctrines of the Christian faith were fully corroborated by the teachings of the cabalistic tradition.

By the latter part of 1486 Pico was ready to put into effect an ambitious project which was to represent a climax to his unremitting scholarly labours of the preceding years.

This was the publication in Rome of his Nine Hundred Theses which he offered to defend publicly against all comers. For the introductory oration he had prepared an essay on the Dignity of Man (De Hominis Dignitate), which is still admired today as one of the noblest documents of Renaissance humanism. It was not long, however, before his high hopes were dashed to the ground. The projected disputation was banned and ~~thir~~teen of the Theses were condemned by a papal commission as heretical or savouring of heresy. This called forth his Apologia, an elaborate and learned defence of himself and the condemned theses hurriedly composed within the space of three weeks. It was also a notable expression of independence of thought and defiance of authoritarianism.

One theme which engaged Pico's attention right up to the time of his death was that of the harmony of Plato and Aristotle. This had been affirmed in the Nine Hundred Theses. In 1491 he published a treatise, De Ente et Uno, which was intended to demonstrate this harmony. Actually, the treatise develops into an inquiry concerning the ~~true~~ cognition of God's true being which is pursued in a metaphysical and mystical manner characteristic of Neoplatonism. The work ends on a strong moralistic note.

Pico's doctrine of numbers as the fount of all knowledge is examined, also his belief in the powers of "natural magic" (magia naturalis) as opposed to illicit magic or necromancy (magia nigra), and the esoteric doctrines which he claimed to have extracted

from the hymns of Orpheus.

Pico's cabalistic studies are examined and his position expounded. An attempt is made to compensate for his reticence in committing these esoteric doctrines to ~~paper~~ writing by reference to the cabalistic ~~wks~~ works of Johann Reuchlin and Pietro Galatino, contemporaries of his who had been inspired by his own enthusiasm for the Christian interpretation of the Jewish Cabala. Special attention is given to the secret names of God derived from the Cabala, particularly those of twelve and forty-two letters which were alleged to be trinitarian in significance.

Pico's life was cut short by an illness when he was in his thirty-second year. During the latter years of his life his thoughts had been occupied more and more with the need for following Christ wholeheartedly, and he had determined that once the literary labours which he had in hand were completed he would devote himself entirely to the preaching of the Gospel. His death took place in Florence, the city that meant most to him, and he was buried there, the funeral oration being given by his friend Girolamo Savonarola.

In writing this work I have provided the first full-length study <sup>in English</sup> of this man who is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable characters and phenomenal scholars of the Italian Renaissance. He was truly one of the universal men of that famous period.

PHILIP E. HUGHES

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1463 - 1494

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A Study of an Intellectual Pilgrimage

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BY

PHILIP EDGCUMBE HUGHES

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1956.

Author's Note

In this study of Pico della Mirandola my aim has been to present a picture of the man and his work which is derived for the most part from his own writings. All translations of passages from Pico's works are my own. The edition of the Opera Omnia used throughout is that printed in Basel in 1572. In the pages which follow the references to the Opera Pici concern the first of the two volumes only, for it is in this volume that Pico's works are given. The second volume contains the writings of his nephew Giovanni Francesco della Mirandola.

P.E.H.

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CHAPTER ITHE YOUNG PHOENIX

In Italian history the fifteenth century was of all centuries the most splendiferous, dissolute, and turbulent, and of the numerous celebrities who flashed, meteorlike and somewhat enigmatically, across the lowering skies of this period not the least brilliant was the person of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Even when a youth not yet out of his teens he was far famed both for his personal elegance and for his widely ranging erudition; at the age of twenty-three he considered his intellectual maturity sufficiently advanced for him to challenge all comers to public disputation respecting all branches of knowledge; and in the thirty-second year of his life the glowing course of this phoenix of genius, as he had been called, was suddenly and lamentably extinguished, the incandescence of his energy exhausted by his relentless pursuit of learning, and his mind intent at the last on thoughts and aspirations higher than those that had occupied his earlier years.

Pico was born on the 24th of February, 1463, the sixth and youngest child of Giovanni Francesco, Count of Mirandola and Concordia in the Modenese. His

nephew and biographer claims that his lineage stemmed back to the Emperor Constantine<sup>1</sup> - a claim, however, more easily affirmed than substantiated. As a child he showed remarkable precocity, being eager to learn and early exhibiting intellectual powers beyond the ordinary. It is said that, after hearing verses read but once, he could then reproduce them from memory on the spot, reciting them at pleasure in order as given or in the reverse order, and also retaining them securely in his mind for the future.<sup>2</sup>

It was an age, of course, in which infant prodigies were not unfashionable. For example, in a letter to

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1. " . . . ab Constantino Caesare per Picum pronepotem, a quo totius familiae cognomentum memoriae proditum sit, traxisse primordia". Ioannis Pici Mirandulae et Concordiae Principi<sup>3</sup> Vita, by his nephew Giovanni Francesco della Mirandola. The Vita is prefixed to the Opera Pici. Its pages are not numbered; hence the absence of page references when the Vita is cited below.

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2. Vita: "In discendo quam celerrimus erat, prompto adeo ingenio praeditus, ut audita semel a recitante carmina, et directu et retrogrado ordine mira omnium admiratione recenseret, tenacissimaque retineret memoria, quod caeteris contra euenire solet".

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Pico, which is of particular interest to us because of its laudatory allusion to Pico's own outstanding prowess, his friend Angelo Poliziano writes excitedly about a boy of eleven, Fabio Ursino, whose precocious abilities had filled him with astonishment. This child not only entertained the famous poet with singing to which he listened with ecstasy, but recited a heroic poem of his own composition of such excellence that Poliziano refused to believe that it was really the boy's unaided work, and not that of some mature scholar, until he had been given evidence which put the matter beyond all doubt. It was, he says, a composition which he himself would not have been ashamed to have written. He goes on to describe how, when requested to turn the poem into prose, Fabio did so with the greatest distinction, expressing himself in words so choice and appropriate as are seldom the product even of a careful writer. The enfant prodige further displayed his powers by dictating extemporaneously five letters to as many amanuenses on a variety of subjects proposed by Poliziano, speaking a few words to each in rotation until the task was completed. Pico is assured that the resulting essays were entirely free from harshness and inconsistency and perfectly connected in argument. Finally, these achievements were crowned with a dexterous exhibition of horsemanship. "There you have the story for one day of Fabio Ursino", writes Poliziano,

"who, should he live to complete the measure of his days (and God grant that he may) and should he achieve that splendid renown towards which he has already begun to move, I predict will prove to be such a person as you, my dear Pico, uniquely have shown yourself to be in our age: one, namely, of such amazing ability that all mankind will venerate him also as though sent down from above".<sup>3</sup> At the time when this letter was written Poliziano and other leading scholars of the day regarded the exceptional promise of Pico's boyhood as having been amply fulfilled in the splendour of his manly attainments.

Since our chief concern in this study is with Pico's thought and writings, biographical questions relating to his childhood and upbringing need not detain us unduly here. It seems certain that his father died when he was still a little boy, and his early education was entrusted

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3. Angelo Poliziano: Opera, pp. 165 f. (Basel, 1553).

This letter is No.2 of Vol. XII of the Letters. "Habes diei unius historiam de Ursino Fabio, qui si superstes fuerit, aetatisque numeros (quod ille sinat Deus) impleuerit, si iam quo gradu coepit, ad excellentem gloriam perrexerit, auguror e<sup>a</sup>ssurum talem, qualis tu solus mi Pice nostro seculo esse uideris: hoc est, ut eum quoque propter admirabilem uirtutem mortales omnes, tanquam si coelitus demissus, uenerentur".

by his mother to tutors under whom he made phenomenal progress. He was, besides, a child of singular beauty. At the age of fourteen he was sent from home to Bologna, whose university then boasted the most famous law school in Europe. There he was to prepare for holy orders - a career which his mother earnestly desired for him; and there, for a period of two years, he applied himself to the study of the calcified ordinances and traditions of ecclesiastical law. This occupation he soon felt to be intellectually barren and unrewarding. Yet, even though his circumstances were uncongenial, Pico, a mere boy still, gave early and unmistakable evidence of his industry and studious disposition by compiling a compendium of all the Papal Decretals, a labour which even accomplished scholars would not have considered light. <sup>4</sup>

It was at this juncture that Pico turned his back on the distasteful exercises of Bologna and began to devote his talents to the close study of philosophy, both secular and religious. During the course of the next half-dozen years his thirst for knowledge caused him to travel extensively through Italy and France, visiting

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4. Vita. ". . . consummatis professoribus opus non tenue".

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the universities and schools of those countries and seeking out the most famous teachers of his day. His mental gifts, combined with his comely appearance, did not fail to make a strong impression wherever he went, and before long this beardless youth had won a resounding reputation for the unusual scope of his scholarship.<sup>5</sup> His nephew describes him as distinguished in appearance, upright and tall of stature, soft of flesh, comely of feature, the whiteness of his skin interspersed with becoming ruddiness, his eyes blue-grey in colour and watchful, his teeth white and even, and his hair flaxen.<sup>6</sup>

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5. Ibid. " . . . operam adeo indefessam studiis illis impendens ut consummatus simul et theologus simul et philosophus imberbis adhuc et esset et haberetur."

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6. Ibid. "Forma autem insigni fuit et liberali, procera et celsa statura, molli carne, uenusta facie, in uniuersum albeni colore decentique rubore interspersa, caesiis et uigilibus oculis, flauo et inaffectedato capillitio, dentibus quoque candidis et <sup>a</sup>sequalibus." It is odd that Walter Pater (The Renaissance, p.37, London, 1925 edition) should cite Sir Thomas More as translating flauo et inaffectedato capillitio by "his hair yellow and abundant", when in fact More has "his heere yelowe and not to piked" (y. More's translation of the Vita, edited with Introduction and Notes by J. M. Rigg, p.8, London, 1890); and it is even odder that Pater should add "and trimmed with more than the usual artifice of the time", which gives the opposite sense of inaffectedato capillitio.

During this period of his life his journeyings and sojournings took him to Ferrara, Padua, Florence, Perugia, and Paris, an avid seeker after knowledge from any and every source. In a letter to Ermol<sup>a</sup>o Barbaro dated the 3rd of June (3 nonas Iunias), 1485, at Florence, he speaks of the laboriousness of his incessant studies in the works of Aquinas, Scotus, Albert, and Averroes during the course of the immediately preceding six years.<sup>7</sup> Two of these years were spent at Padua, to which he came in 1480 when he was seventeen, and it was here that he first plunged into the stream of Scholastic and Arabian Aristotelianism. It was here, too, that his interest in Jewish mysticism was first stimulated.

Amongst Pico's teachers at Padua Nicoletto Verni<sup>a</sup> and Elia del Medigo require special mention. It may be concluded that from the former he received a thorough initiation into the intellectual systems of the four writers mentioned in his letter to Ermolao Barbaro: Aquinas, Scotus, Albert, and Averroes; for Vernia, though famed as an exponent of the philosophy of Averroes, the twelfth century Arabian commentator on Aristotle, was hardly less versed in the teaching of the three ecclesiastical thinkers. Averroes, commonly known among

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7. Opera Pici, p. 352.

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the Schoolmen as "the Commentator", held the doctrines of the unitary nature of the active intellect (into which, ex hypothesi, the individual intellect or soul is assimilated at death, thus leading to belief in an impersonal or unindividuated immortality which, as was to be expected, Aquinas and others opposed) and of the eternity of the material world (a notion with which Aquinas and other Schoolmen were willing to toy). While the so-called "double truth" theory of Averro<sup>is</sup>m does not imply, as some have imagined, that what is true in philosophy need not coincide with what is true in theology, but postulates rather a unity of both theological and philosophical truth, yet in effect, if not in intention, it can only be made to operate by subordinating or adjusting the one to the other in the many places where philosophy is in conflict with theology or with itself.

The effect on Pico's mind of this teaching of the fundamental unity of the intellect may be discerned in the grand project which at this stage of his career began to obsess his thinking and to determine the direction of his intellectual ambition - the project, namely, of demonstrating the essential harmony of all systems of philosophy and theology. Indeed, to such an extent was his intellectual outlook governed by this idea of "concord" that his friends felt that his

aristocratic title, Princeps Concordiae,<sup>8</sup> had in his person assumed with singular appropriateness a double significance: his right to be called "Prince of Concord" was not only hereditary but intellectual as well. Pico's zeal in seeking to display this harmony was commendable, but his method can scarcely be regarded as satisfactory. It was a repetition of the old story: by the use of allegorical and anagogical modes of interpretation all discrepancies and antipathies in the various systems of wisdom, however <sup>incompatible</sup> they may appear to be on the surface, may be resolved. The pursuit of this mirage, fascinating though it was to the enthusiastic young searcher after truth, intensely hopeful of comprehending the harmonious and unitive principle of all thought, could hardly fail to bring disillusionment in its train and wiser views in the end.

Vernia, indeed, got into trouble with the ecclesiastical authorities because of his influential advocacy of the doctrine of the universal intellect. Threatening to excommunicate him, the Bishop of Padua described him as one who had caused practically all Italy to err by this

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8. Concordia was a small duchy in Northern Italy.

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teaching.<sup>9</sup> In 1482, whether impelled by motives of expediency or by conviction it is difficult to say, Vernia published a recantation of the doctrine under the title De Pluralitate Intellectus.<sup>10</sup>

Elia del Medigo, whom Pico also met first at Padua, was a Cretan Jew whose life, like Pico's, was brief but distinguished.<sup>11</sup> Elia too was a devotee of Averroistic Aristotelianism and wielded a fairly prolific pen. Among his works were Latin versions of some of the writings of Aristotle and Averroes and a number of original treatises on philosophical subjects. It was Elia who initiated Pico into the mysteries of the Hebrew language. The close friendship which sprang up between Elia and Pico was to prove intellectually fruitful in other ways also. In 1485 Elia published his work The Test of Religion (Bechinath-

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 9. V. E. Anagnine: Pic de la Mirandole, in Revue d'Histoire de la Philosophie et d'Histoire de la Civilisation, 1934, p.120. ". . . et disputando et docendo unum esse in omnibus intellectum sic explanaueris, ut totam poene Italiam errare feceris."  
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10. V. A. Dulles: Princeps Concordiae: Pico della Mirandola and the Scholastic Tradition, pp.30 ff. (Cambridge, Mass., 1941).  
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11. He was, according to the Jewish Encyclopedia, born in Candia in 1460 and died there in 1497. Graetz, however, History of the Jews, IV, p.312 (London, 1892), gives his dates as 1463-1498.

ha-Dath) with the purpose of demonstrating that between philosophy and religion there exists a perfect accord - a theme which, as has been remarked, gripped the imagination of the youthful Pico, and which Pico himself attempted to bring to expression when, the following year, he propounded his Nine Hundred Theses for public disputation.

Elia's particular interest in Aristotelian metaphysics culminated in the writing of his treatise De Ente et Essentia et Uno. Elia tells us, in the preface to the work, that this was a subject which he discussed much with Pico when they were together in Perugia in 1486.<sup>12</sup> There can be no doubt that these conversations with his Jewish friend stimulated Pico's thought on this subject and were in a sense a preparative to the publication, in 1492, of his work De Ente et Uno; though, as will in due course be seen, its immediate occasion was a request from Poliziano for a written demonstration that Plato and Aristotle do not disagree with each other in their understanding of metaphysics.

It is of no little interest to find that, despite his supposed contempt for the Jewish Cabala as being "founded upon a mental swamp", lacking in antiquity, and

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12. "Cum essem Perusii cum doctissimo comiti magnifico domino Ioanne Mirandulano, philosopho clarissimo, multa de esse et essentis et uno diximus."

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the work of a forger,<sup>13</sup> Elia none the less procured for Pico a copy of the Commentary on the Pentateuch by Menahem of Recanati - not, however, it would seem, without entertaining some misgivings concerning Pico's credulity. The work was, in reality, a commentary on the Zohar and it constituted a main source of Pico's cabalistic knowledge. This action of Elia's on Pico's behalf seems to support the correctness of Anagnine's less extreme judgment to the effect that Elia's attitude to the Cabala was "incertaine, indecise, ondoyante".<sup>14</sup> Since Menahem's commentary is not an original work but a simplification of the Zohar, J. L. Blau describes Pico's source as "a watered-down version of the cardinal document of the cabala".<sup>15</sup>

After leaving Padua in 1482, Pico, not yet out of his teens, made his way to Florence, and there he met the famous Platonist scholar Marsilio Ficino under circumstances

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13. Graetz: op.cit., IV, p.315; similarly the Jewish Encyclopedia.

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14. Anagnine: op.cit., p.203.

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15. J. L. Blau: The Christian Interpretation of the Cabala in the Renaissance, p.28 (New York, 1944).

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which the latter regarded as full of supernatural significance. This was not Pico's first visit to Florence, for he had been there three years previously, and it was then that the young prodigy had made the acquaintance of Ficino, Poliziano, and Benivieni, adding them to the number of his illustrious friends. Now, in 1482, Ficino explains<sup>16</sup> how during the Council of Florence, more than forty years earlier, the noble Cosimo de' Medici frequently listened to the Greek philosopher Gemistos Pletho<sup>17</sup> discoursing on the Platonic mysteries. To such a degree was Cosimo excited and inspired by Pletho's ardent advocacy, that he conceived the scheme of founding his own Academy in Florence where Plato's writings could be translated and his doctrines expounded.

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16. In the Preface to his translation of Plotinus: Ficino: Opera Omnia, vol. II, p.1537 (Basel, 1576).

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17. His real name was Georgios Gemistos, but at Florence he assumed the name "Pletho" or "Plethon", both because it was synonymous with "Gemistos" - γέμιστος, like πλήθων, means "filled" - and also because in sound it was suggestive of the great name of Plato, whose doctrines he was intent on propagating.

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"In attempting to bring so noble a project into being", says Ficino, "he destined me, though still a boy, the son of his personal doctor, for this great task, and daily educated me with this end in view." At that time, indeed, Ficino was only about seven years of age, but already clear signs of his exceptional intellectual capacities were apparent, and Cosimo's hopes of him were not to be disappointed. "He took care", continues Ficino, "that I should have all the Greek texts, not only of Plato, but of Plotinus also. Afterwards, however, in the year 1463, in which I reached my thirtieth birthday, he required that I should first translate Hermes Trismegistus, and then Plato. In the few months during which he still lived I completed the translation of Hermes, and then I set to work on Plato. He also wanted Plotinus translated, but of this he breathed no word to me, fearing lest he should impose too heavy a burden upon me all at one time. This was typical of the clemency of that great man towards his friends and of his notable moderation towards all. And so it was that I, being no seer, had no inkling that I should ever tackle Plotinus." Yet in a manner both wonderful and portentous, as it seemed to Ficino, Cosimo "expressed, or rather impressed from above, that project about which he had kept silent while he was alive." It was Pico's unexpected visit that led Ficino to this

conviction, as will now become apparent.

The day of the publication of Ficino's Latin translation of Plato coincided exactly with Pico's arrival in Florence, though Pico's decision to come to this city at this particular juncture had been dictated by no preconceived purpose. Of this coincidence Ficino saw no other explanation than that Pico's mind and movements had been supernaturally stimulated by Cosimo's spirit from beyond the grave. But the remarkable nature of this meeting was not exhausted by this circumstance, for Ficino had, as already stated, commenced his translation of Plato some nineteen years previously, in 1463, the very year in which Pico had been born; and now Pico, arriving on the very day and almost at the very hour of the publication of this translation, immediately, pausing only to offer a brief salutation, inquired of Ficino concerning Plato. "Today", came the response, "my Plato has gone forth from my threshold" ("equidem Plato noster hodie liminibus nostris est egressus"). "Thereupon", proceeds Ficino, "he earnestly congratulated me; and then soon, with what words we neither of us know, he not so much induced as incited me to translate Plotinus."

That at the moment when Plato was as it were being reborn in Ficino's translation Pico should also have been born - born, too, under the same constellation as that

under which Ficino had been born thirty years earlier (1433); that Pico should subsequently have arrived in Florence on the very date on which his Plato was published, and should as though by some miracle have breathed to him the ancient vow of the great Cosimo respecting Plotinus, the "new Plato", a vow which, though hidden from himself, he believed to have been revealed to Pico from above: such a sequence of coincidences was sufficient to convince Ficino of the divine ordering of these events, and pointed to Pico as being in the fifteenth century, no less than Plotinus in the third, a sort of Plato rediuius.<sup>18</sup> This entertaining narrative gives some indication of the extent to which Ficino's outlook was governed by superstition and astrology. This was not uncommon at that time, even amongst intellectuals; nor was Pico free from such credulity. The day was coming,

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18. It was Ficino's conviction that Plato had been re-incarnated in Plotinus. He assured those who had assembled to hear his public lectures in Florence in 1484 that in listening to the words of Plotinus they should prepare themselves to hear Plato himself speaking through him; for in view of the fact that Plato had been reborn in the person of Plotinus, and that the two philosophers had been inspired by the same daemon, it was beyond all dispute that they spoke the same language and taught the same doctrine (Anagnine, op.cit., p.215).

however, when a more enlightened Pico would set his hand to the composition of a major work against the astrological cult.

In this same year, 1482, another event took place which was to exercise a profound influence on Pico. This was his first encounter with Girolamo Savonarola, in many respects a unique personality of his day. The occasion was a chapter of the Dominican order convened in Reggio d'Emilia which Savonarola was attending as a delegate from the Florentine convent of S. Marco. Besides the large number of clerics who were present, there were also some laymen reputed for their learning, amongst whom Pico, youthful, enthusiastic, and distinguished in appearance, was by no means the least notable. Here Pico's friendship with Savonarola, a man seemingly very dissimilar from himself, had its beginnings. It is interesting to observe how frequently it happens that a casual meeting with a person who by temperament, aspirations, and aesthetic preference appears to be cast in an entirely different mould can produce effects in a man's life, and, indeed, in his character, which are none the less deep because they are seen only after the lapse of a period of years. This was certainly true of the impression made upon Pico by Savonarola.

Here, then, these two young Italians are present

at the same gathering. Savonarola is little more than ten years Pico's senior, unattractive to look at, swarthy of complexion, morose by temperament, his vulture-like features accentuated by the monk's cowl which is drawn over his head. Not only does he lack Pico's comeliness, but also his easy sociability and spontaneous charm of manner. As the conference proceeds the Ferrarese monk sits glum and motionless, contemplative, but showing no evidence of interest in the jejune scholastic speculations on which his fellow-monks are expending their ingenuity. The talk, however, swings to an ethical question and suddenly this hitherto unobtrusive figure is stirred into animation, the bright eyes flash with prophetic fire from under his furrowed brow, he is on his feet, his ascetic frame quivering with the intensity of his feeling, the hot words pouring in a molten torrent from his expressive lips. His slashing oratory is curbed by no respect of persons as he denounces the corruption and unspirituality of the prelates and clergy of the day: they are men who praise abstemiousness, purity, humility, fasting, while they themselves are surfeited with luxury, lustings, self-esteem, and gluttony; they discourse vaingloriously on philosophers and poets, but never proclaim the truths of Holy Scripture and Christ's Gospel; they are building the church of Satan, not of God, and are preparing men for hell, not heaven; they

are false and impious pastors who will not escape the swift judgment of Almighty God which must shortly overtake their wicked and unrepentant nation!

Here, beyond doubt, was a master spirit, the sudden eruption of whose eloquence was like a depth-charge breaking up the complacent surface of the gathering. His audience was transfixed by his moral force. This was a voice alien to their age, and it struck their ears as something new and terrifying. Pico, no less than the others, was startled by the power of Savonarola's fervent denunciations. Having once heard this prophet crying in the wilderness he could never forget him, nor could he withhold from him his sincerest admiration. But there were bitter lessons for Pico to learn before the seeds sown in his spirit by this man whom from now on he so deeply respected were to produce a harvest in his own life.

These two encounters in the year 1482, the one with Ficino and the other with Savonarola, may well indicate the commencement of the struggle for the mastery in Pico's breast between the desire for the praise of men and the desire for the glory of God. The years that immediately ensued were to witness the ascendancy of the former as the young scholar's heart burned with ambition for the reputation and approval which this world has to offer.

But an appreciation of those values which are other-worldly and a determination to walk worthily before God, irrespective of the commendation or censure of men, were, at last, to grow strong and prevail.

The extravagant adulation with which the youthful Pico was acclaimed on all sides early accustomed him to expect the approbation of others and, although he was by nature if anything less arrogant and self-opinionated than most, it is scarcely surprising that he should have become ambitious of achieving the highest human glory. The following is but one example, received by him when he was only twenty-one years of age, of those laudatory effusions which used to reach him from many different quarters. It occurs in a letter to him from Alessandro Cortesio. "In my estimation your genius is altogether unique and, search as I may through the eulogies of the Greeks, I fail to find anyone to whom I may justly compare you. At the very most one may perhaps fancy that there may once have been someone who was your equal, but none such is to be found nowadays. May all men of genius pardon me when I say that they all are far surpassed by Pico alone, whom the bounty of nature has favoured to such a degree that even she herself must be amazed at the copious concentration in one person of all that is praise-

worthy."<sup>19</sup> And this is only an extract from the context of a much more extensive panegyric.

Pico, indeed, in these days was not above adopting a subterfuge in order that he might hear the praises of his own name uttered by the lips of another. In a letter to Antonio Pizzamano, Poliziano recounts how he was the victim of such an amicable imposture on Pico's part. He was away in the country when a disguised Pico, like a temporary Proteus (temporarius uersipellis), accosted him and artfully endeavoured to elicit Poliziano's sentiments concerning himself; but before long, when he thought the jest had been carried far enough, Pico laughingly disclosed his identity, so that Poliziano was enabled to enjoy the presence and conversation of his delightful young friend without restraint or dissimulation. In this same letter Poliziano describes an occasion when others inflicted a

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19. Opera Pici, p.399. "Meo quidem iudicio extra omnem genii aleam positus es, ac te ut Graecas perquiram laudationes cui merito conferam non inuenio, et ad summam, parem tibi aliquem quandoque fuisse opinari licet, uidere autem hoc tempore non licet. Dent ueniam ingeniosi omnes, multam ab uno Pico omnes superantur, quem it<sup>a</sup> naturae benignitas fouit, ut ipsi quoque mirum (I have ventured to read "mirum" for "uirum") uideri debeat tantam in unum laudum cunctarum copiam esse consortam".

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like deception upon him in circumstances which were by no means so harmless: and so it is evident that Pico was not alone in practising this device.<sup>20</sup> But, however much we may disapprove of such behaviour, even among friends, Pico was not incorrigibly vain, as were so many of his contemporaries in an age which was excessively addicted to the glorification of human ability. With him, as has so often been the case with others, the value<sup>e</sup> of humility was to be reached by traversing the road of disillusionment.

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20. Poliziano: Opera, pp. 53 f. This letter is No.7 of Vol.IV of the Letters.

CHAPTER II

THE PARISIAN STYLE

In 1485 Pico, still avidly seeking after knowledge, left his native land and made his first visit to the French capital. There he remained from July until March of the following year, when he retraced his steps to Florence. As it happens, evidence concerning Pico's activities and experiences during this period of seven months is lacking, and so it is impossible to assess precisely the measure of any influences that were brought to bear upon him during this phase of his career. The university of Paris was at that time famous for its theological school, and in the courses which it offered the differing emphases of Thomism, Scotism, and nominalism were freely represented. Dulles offers the interesting conjecture that Pico's proposition questioning the adoration of the cross of Christ or any other image with latria,<sup>21</sup> which was one of the theses condemned by the papal commission, may have been suggested to his mind through contact with Etienne Pillet (or Brûlefer) who at

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21. Opera Pici, p.94. "Nec crux Christi nec ulla imago adoranda est adoratione latriae, etiam eo modo quo ponit Thomas": No.14 of 29 conclusions in theology "secundum opinionem propriam a communi modo dicendi theologorum satis diuersam".

the time of his visit was master of the Scotists at Paris, and who spoke out against the cult of images and papal authoritarianism.<sup>22</sup> (It was probably his outspokenness on these matters that necessitated Brûlefer's departure from Paris in 1490.) We may add that Pico would also have learnt of the stir which was caused in this university in July, 1484, just a year before his arrival in Paris, by Jean Laillier, a young licentiate in theology who had proposed for his doctorate a number of theses which assailed the accepted teaching regarding such matters as the hierarchy of the Church, the canonization of saints, the marriage of priests, the obligation to fast in Lent, and belief in the legends respecting the saints.<sup>23</sup>

One thing is quite apparent, however, and that is that Pico was strongly impressed by the manner in which the Parisian scholars presented their thought, especially as it was in such sharp contrast to the Italian style.

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22. Dulles: op.cit. pp.38 ff.

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23. V. Léon Dorez et Louis Thuasne: Pico de la Mirandole en France (1485-1488), pp.35 f. (Paris, 1897).

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The latter was elegant, suave, hypnotic, a glittering veneer beneath which was little of substance. The former was by comparison unrefined, lacking in ornamentation, concerned with the content of the thing said rather than with the method of saying it. The latter was the mark of literary poseurs, the former of serious philosophers. Thus in the brief preamble to his Nine Hundred Theses Pico explains that in presenting them he has not copied the sparkle of Latin rhetoric, but the style of the most famous Parisian debaters of that day.<sup>24</sup>

In the section of the Apologia in which he defends his proposition respecting the manner of Christ's desc<sup>e</sup>nt into hades, Pico speaks of his reverence for the university of Paris and points out that it was only because of his respect for this university that he was unwilling to advance this particular proposition as being other than probable.<sup>25</sup>

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24. Opera Pici, p.63. " . . . in quibus recitandis, non Romanae linguae nitorem, sed celebratissimorum Parisiensium disputatorum dicendi genus est imitatus, propterea quod eo nostri temporis plerique omnes utuntur".

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25. Ibid., p.135. " . . . et ego propter hoc solum, id est propter reuerentiam uniuersitatis Parisiensis, nolui ponere hanc meam conclusionem, nisi tanquam probabilem".

It may also be legitimate to suggest that Pico's aversion for the Italian style may in part have been due to the impression made upon him by Savonarola's preaching. When Savonarola arrived in Florence in 1481 he found that the people had ears only for a type of preaching which was anything but profound or Christian. The last thing they desired was that their consciences should be stirred. All they demanded from the pulpit was a mellifluous delivery of elegantly turned rhetorical niceties, in imitation of one or other of the classical authors, interlarded with quotations from the pagan poets and philosophers of the past. The end of Florentine pulpit oratory was to beguile the ear with the harmony of its periods and cadences.

But such insincerities and refinements were entirely foreign to Savonarola, whose heart was burdened and burning with the solemn message which he believed had been committed to him by God. His quotations were not from Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and the comic poets (though he was by no means unversed in their writings), but only and always from the pages of Holy Scripture. Having been invited to give the course of Lenten sermons in the fashionable church of S. Lorenzo in 1492, it was a heavy blow to this ardent spirit to find that his preaching caused offence to the Florentine populace, and that his congregations dwindled until there

remained a mere score or so of individuals to listen to his prophetic utterances. The doubts concerning his divine mission which assailed him after this disappointment did not last; nor was he willing to consider the entreaties of his friends to adopt a style of preaching which would be more palatable to the inhabitants of Florence, for he was fully convinced that their urgent need was to hear the voice of God speaking to their consciences and calling them to repentance. His perseverance was to be rewarded: another six or seven years and the Florentine citizens would forget their sophistication as they thronged in great numbers to hear this austere prophet of their day utter awful warnings of divine displeasure and judgment.

On these questions of style and content Pico set down his sentiments at some length in a letter written from Florence to his friend Ermolao Barbaro in June, 1485, soon after returning from his first visit to Paris. This letter is an entertaining and good-humoured rejoinder to one in which Ermolao, after having spoken slightly of the barbarisms of the Teutons and other non-Latin races, had extolled the polish and elegance of the classical style as a means whereby an author might achieve an immortal reputation. Pico's reply in itself affords ample proof of the fecundity of his thought and the wide range of his learning, though at the

time he was only in his twenty-third year. It is, in fact, a defence of the philosopher, the lover of wisdom, as opposed to the mere stylist. To add effect to his argument, Pico identifies himself with the barbarians (barbari) for whom Ermolao had expressed contempt, thus, with Ermolao's second name in mind, introducing a note of amiable irony. In the following paragraphs we give a condensed version of the letter.<sup>26</sup>

"We barbarians (says Pico) have lived in the past and hereafter shall continue to live as men of renown, not, however, in the sects of grammarians and pedants, but in the circles of philosophers, in the assemblies of wise men, where the subject of discussion is not concerning the mother of Andromache or the children of Niobe and similar nugatory triflings, but the relations between things human and divine."<sup>27</sup> It would be found that the barbarians,

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26. For the full text of the original see Opera Pici, pp.351 ff.

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27. Eugenio Garin (Edizione Nazionale dei Classici del Pensiero Italiano, Vol.I, containing a new edition of Pico's De Hominis Dignitate, Heptaplus, and De Ente et Uno, together with an Introduction and Italian translation) aptly remarks (p.10) that this passage recalls Seneca's words (Epist.88): "Quattuor milia librorum Didymus grammaticus scripsit. . . in his libris de patria Homeri quaeritur, in his de Aeneae matre uera, in his libidinosior Anacreon, an ebriosior uixerit, in his an Sappho publica fuerit. . ."

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if lacking in eloquence, were not destitute of wisdom. That their wisdom should not have been combined with eloquence is nothing blameworthy; on the contrary, to combine the two should be regarded as criminal. So greatly is the office of the orator opposed to that of the philosopher, that the opposition could not be greater. What is the task of the rhetorician but to lie, to deceive, to cheat, to misdirect? What affinity can there be between such a person and the philosopher whose sole concern is to learn the truth and to demonstrate it to others? Excessive verbal ornamentation and affectation cast suspicion on the author's confidence in his own statements. Thus we find that sacred matters are written in a rustic manner rather than with studied eloquence, since there is nothing more unbecoming or harmful than this elaborate method of expression whenever the investigation of truth is involved.

"The plain truth is that there is nothing further removed in every respect from the function of a philosopher than that which in any way savours of extravagance and ostentation. Socrates used to say that Sicyonian slippers were shapely and becoming to the foot, but were not at all suited to Socrates. The conduct of the man of the world is quite dissimilar from that of the philosopher, as also are the things he eats and the words he utters. The philosopher employs these things merely to minister to

necessity, but the man of the world for the sake of appearance. If this were not the consideration of the latter he would not be a man of the world, and if it were the affectation of the former he would not be a philosopher. Had Pythagoras been able to live without food, he would have abstained even from herbs; had he been able to communicate his thoughts by looks, or by some other method not involving speech, he would not have spoken at all, so much did he shun the adornment and embellishment of language.

"Our concern is with what we write, not how we write it; and yet we are concerned as to how, in so far as we seek to avoid all pompousness and rhetorical flourish. It is not our wish to be elegant, beguiling, and witty, but useful, serious, and deserving of respect, so that authority may be gained from the solemnity of the subject rather than commendation from the suavity of the style. Nor do we court the applause of the theatre, hoping that smooth and rhythmical periods may charm the ear, mingling wit with urbanity. But we do invite not so much the admiration as the silence of the few who are accustomed to investigate the inner significance of whatever is extracted from the secret recesses of nature or brought down to men from the courts of heaven.

"In our writings let the brevity of style be admired, pregnant none the less with matters numerous and weighty,

the words expressed containing far-reaching meanings, full of questions and full of solutions. See how skilled and well trained we are in removing ambiguities, solving difficulties, unravelling intricacies, adroitly invalidating falsehoods and establishing truths by means of syllogisms. By these credentials, Ermolao, we have hitherto preserved our fame from oblivion and beyond doubt shall hereafter preserve it. If, as you say, we are popularly regarded as uncouth, rough, and uncultured, this is to our glory, not our shame. It was not for the populace that we wrote, but for you and those like you. Just as the ancients by their enigmas and the veil of fables used to keep unlearned men at a distance from their mysteries, so it has been our custom to frighten from our feasts by a somewhat harsh exterior of words those who could only pollute them.<sup>28</sup> People who wish to hide a treasure, if they have no place of concealment, generally cover ~~it~~<sup>it</sup> over with sweepings and rubbish, so that none who pass by may lay hands on it except those whom they adjudge worthy of such a reward. Similarly philosophers are careful to conceal their wares from the populace who are equipped neither to

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28. This is one of Pico's favourite themes, and a main principle with him, as we shall see, of esoteric interpretation.

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understand nor to appreciate them; and so anything written by them of a theatrical and public-pleasing nature - anything, in short, that seems to be accommodated to the tastes of the mob - can only be regarded as degrading.

"It was not eloquence that Cicero used to require in a philosopher, but that he should not be lacking in substance and doctrine. That man, as wise as he was learned, recognized that our task is to regulate the mind rather than the diction, and to guard against aberration of reason rather than of speech. Plato banished all poets from his republic since he realised the corrupting influence of their outward show, and committed its government to philosophers. Alcibiades remarked that it was the simple and unadorned words of Socrates that moved him, but the elaborate and resplendent orations of Pericles not at all.<sup>29</sup> A palace of marble is not meant to be painted over, and to whitewash it is to detract from its dignity and beauty. The same is the case with wisdom and with the subjects of which philosophers

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29. Plato: Repub. X, 595A ff.

Sympos. 215E ff.

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treat. Outward adornment obscures rather than enhances them. Is it not universally agreed that beautiful faces are not improved by cosmetics? In every sphere things superimposed conceal beauty and only display what they have added; and so that which is original, when it is superior to what is adventitious, does not gain but loses by the accession. For the same reason philosophy presents herself unadorned, everywhere obvious to be seen; she welcomes inspection, knowing that she has no defects to hide. To the extent that you detract from her, to that extent do you detract from her comeliness and diminish her glory: she wishes to remain pure and free from any admixture. Any mingling, addition, or adulteration alters her nature; she stands, like the mathematical point, one and indivisible. Therefore there is no place for playful figures of speech or excessive verbiage or wanton hyperbole or bold ornamentation in a matter so serious and of such moment, in which to add, diminish, or alter anything would be a crime.

"An Arab will say the same thing as you, and so will an Egyptian, but they will not say it in Latin; yet they will say it none the less correctly. The names of things are determined either arbitrarily or in accordance with their nature. If they are fortuitously assigned, for example, by the common consent of a social group who agree by what name each single thing shall be called, then

so far as they are concerned each thing is correctly named. What is there to prevent these philosophers, whom you term barbarians, from deciding on one standard of speech, which is just as sacred to them as the words of the Latin tongue are to you? It is quite unreasonable to call their language incorrect and yours correct, if this assignment of words is entirely arbitrary. If you are unwilling for it to be named Latin, you may call ~~it~~ French or British or Spanish or what is commonly dubbed "Parisian".<sup>30</sup> No doubt it would be possible for us to live without a language, though not conveniently, but certainly not without a heart. He is not refined who is impatient of polite literature. He who is destitute of philosophy is not a man. The most inarticulate wisdom can be beneficial, but eloquence without wisdom cannot but be harmful, like a sword in the hand of a madman.

"Let Lucretius write of nature, of God, of providence, and let one of us barbarians, Scotus for instance, write of the same things, and, further, let the latter write in verse so that he may be all the more at a disadvantage. Lucretius will say that the first principles of things are atoms and a vacuum, that God has a body and is ignorant of

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30. An allusion to the Parisian style which Pico is here defending.

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human affairs, that all things are sustained by a random jostling of corpuscles<sup>31</sup>: but he will say it elegantly and in Latin. Scotus will explain how natural substances are constituted in their proper matter and form, and that God is a separate mind, knowing all things and superintending all things, and yet, while watching and controlling even the lowest creatures, not in the slightest degree removed from His own tranquillity<sup>32</sup>; but he will say it in a manner that is insipid, rough, and remote from latinity. Who, pray, could be in any doubt as to which is the better poet and which the better philosopher? Beyond any controversy, Scotus excels in philosophy as much as Lucretius does in delicacy of language. But how great is the difference! - the one is deficient in speech, the other in judgment; the one is ignorant of the laws of grammar, not to mention poesy, the other of God and nature; the one, most clumsy with words, has thoughts which cannot adequately be praised in words, while the other, most eloquent of utterance, devotes his eloquence to unutterable impieties".

In bringing this letter to a conclusion, Pico tells

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31. Lucretius: De Rerum Natura.

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32. John Duns Scotus: De Primo Principio, etc.

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Ermolao that he has sought to put forward such arguments as a barbarian might offer in defence of his own barbarism, as a sort of intellectual exercise, but that in prosecuting his assault upon eloquence he has at times done so beyond the limits of his own judgment. In this way he hopes to evoke from Ermolao a worthy rejoinder. He adds, however, that he is heartily sick of certain grammaticasters who, when they have traced a couple of words to their origin, are so carried away with boastfulness and self-importance that by comparison with themselves they reckon philosophers to be objects of contempt.<sup>33</sup>

So much, then, for Pico's defence of the "barbarians". This letter displays the characteristic facility with which Pico could sit down and write expansively and intelligently on a subject, calling upon his already considerable learning for quotations and allusions with which to sharpen his argument. After six years of intensive study and preparation he is eager to embark on a period of literary productivity. Now in his early twenties, he is already sure of his ground and able to withstand every

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33. " . . . mouent mihi stomachum grammatistae quidam, qui cum duas tenuerint uocabulorum origines, ita se ostentant, ita uenditant, ita circumferunt iactabundi, ut prae seipsis pro nihilo habendos philosophos arbitrentur".

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siren voice that would lure him from a single-minded pursuit of the objectives which he has set before himself. One such voice, as we shall shortly see, was that of his friend Andrea Corneo. From boyhood days Pico had enjoyed the combination of an unusual number of advantages: nobility of birth, comeliness of appearance, exceptional powers of intellect, the praise and friendship of great men, and freedom from financial cares. To a young man thus lavishly endowed a life of luxury, indolence, and self-indulgence might have been an attraction; a score of princely courts would readily have opened their gates to him and provided him with ample opportunity for a career of pompous diletantism; or his entry into the ranks of a corrupt church would have afforded the certain prospect of preferment and prominence. But this was not the way for Pico: he was fired with a more honourable ambition. Intent on the grand project which thus early he had set before himself, he chose the seclusion of his books and immersed himself in the study of Greek and Arabian metaphysics, Jewish Cabala, and Oriental languages.

Andrea Corneo had written to Pico urging him to emerge from his scholarly retirement and to assume the mantle of a man of public affairs. Pico's rejoinder to this provocative sally by his friend not only provides an able defence of the contemplative life, but also offers some adumbration of the nature of the labours which were

at that time occupying his energies. Pico sent his reply from Perugia on the 15th of October, 1486,<sup>34</sup> and the following excerpts from it are of particular interest.

"You exhort me to an active and public life", writes Pico, "remarking that for me to have spent so long in the study of philosophy can only result in frustration and, indeed, in dishonour and reproach, unless it is followed by exertion in the arena of active affairs. But the fact is, my dear Andrea, that were I now disposed to accede to your suggestion and agree with you in this matter I should have thrown away all the laborious hours I have spent in study. This is a pernicious and monstrous notion that has seized men's minds, namely, that philosophical studies are not the province of gentlemen of rank, or else ought only to be toyed with in leisure hours with a view to achieving a display of wit rather than the improvement of the mind. With such persons the maxim of Neoptolemus carries the authority of law: aut nil philosophandum, aut

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34. Opera Pici, pp.368 ff. More is doubly at fault when he gives Paris as the city of origin and 1492 as the year - "wryten at Paris the xv daye of Octobre the yere of grace M.CCCC.lxxxxii" (op.cit., p.41).

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paucis.<sup>35</sup> They account as trifling and fanciful the pronouncements of wise men to the effect that secure and genuine happiness consists in the possessions of the mind, whereas it is the external things that affect the body or fortune which concern us little or not at all.<sup>36</sup>

"But you will say that you wish me to encompass the role of Martha in such a way as meanwhile not to relinquish that of Mary."<sup>37</sup> I am willing to concede the point in part;

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35. V. Remains of Old Latin, Vol. I, p. 368; ed. E. H. Warmington (Loeb Classical Library, London, 1935), where the fragment from Ennius' Neoptolemus is given as follows: "Philosophari mihi necesse est, paucis, nam omnino haud placet".

Cf. Cicero: Tusc. Disp., II, i: "Neoptolemus quidem apud Ennium philosophari sibi <sup>a</sup>rit necesse est, sed paucis; nam omnino haud placere". Pico uses the phrase again in the De Hominis Dignitate: ". . . ita inuasit fere omnium mentes exitialis haec et monstrosa persuasio, aut nihil aut paucis philosophandum . . ." (Opera Pici, p. 322).

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36. ". . . aut parum aut nihil": the counterpart of "aut nil aut paucis" above.

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37. Luke x. 38-42.

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and I do not condemn or accuse those who fulfil the double function. But, while there is nothing wrong in having passed from a contemplative to a public life, it certainly does not follow that not to have done so should be censured as culpable or criminal. Shall it then be reckoned as offensive for a man constantly to apply himself to the pursuit of virtue for virtue's sake and to seek nothing extraneous to her, to enjoy the detachment which enables him to investigate the divine mysteries and the secrets of nature and at the same time to despise and neglect other matters, when the former are adequate to satisfy the desires of their votaries? Is it then illiberal or unbecoming for a man of rank to devote himself to the study of wisdom without any mercenary ambitions? He has certainly never been a philosopher whose attitude to philosophy is that he may or may not indulge in philosophy, according to fancy. Such a person is a tradesman and no philosopher!<sup>38</sup>

"You write that it is high time for me to pay my devoirs to one or other of the most influential princes of Italy. You are evidently unaware of the esteem in which philosophers hold themselves, who regard themselves,

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38. "Certe numquam philosophatus est, qui ideo philosophatus est, ut aliquando aut possit aut nolit philosophari. Mercaturam exercuit ille, non philosophiam".

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in the phrase of Horace as "kings of kings".<sup>39</sup> They do not know what it is to endure enslavement to fashions; they live in separation, satisfied with their own company and the tranquillity of a contented mind; they seek nothing outside of themselves; what the vulgar mob hold in esteem they hold in disesteem; in fine, they despise and neglect those things which human desire and ambition thirst after.

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39. Horace: Epist., I,1,106-8:

"Ad summam: sapiens uno minor est Ioue, diues,  
Liber, honoratus, pulcher, rex denique regum;  
Praecipue sanus, nisi cum pituita molesta est"

- a dig by the poet at the Stoic maxim: In hoc sapiens minor est Ioue, quia moritur. Cf. Sat., I,iii,124 ff.:

" . . . diues, qui sapiens est,  
Et sutor bonus et solus formosus et est rex,  
. . . sapiens operi<sup>s</sup> sic optimus omnis  
Est opifex solus, sic rex".

Lucian, writing of the Stoic philosopher, shows a satirical vein similar to that of Horace: *μόνος οὗτος σοφός, μόνος καλός, μόνος δίκαιος, ἄνδρεῖος, βασιλεύς, ἔήττω, πλούσιος, νομοθέτης, καὶ τᾶλλα, ὅποσα ἔστιν.*

(Vit. Auct., 20).

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"Since this is my settled judgment, I prefer my little cell, my studies, the delights of my books, my peace of mind, to princely palaces, civic administration, and all your intrigues and favouritisms at court. Nor is it my hope that as the reward of my literary leisure I should be tossed and driven about in the surge and tumult of public affairs, but rather that I should at length bring to the birth those children which I have conceived, and at an appropriate hour make public something which will attest, if not my learning, at least my natural disposition and my diligence. And lest you should imagine there has been any slackening in my industry and toil, let me inform you that as the result of my intensive and unremitting application to my studies I have succeeded in learning the Hebrew and Chaldean (i.e. Aramaic) languages, and am now attempting to overcome the difficulties of the Arabic tongue".

It may not be inopportune to interrupt at this point the letter to Andrea Corneo in order to make some observations concerning Pico's linguistic studies. In later years there was a tradition that at the age of eighteen Pico had had a knowledge of no less than twenty-two languages. On this Voltaire<sup>40</sup> justly comments: "This

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40. Voltaire should not be regarded as a reliable source of information concerning Pico: he speaks, for instance, of Pico's 1,400 theses, whereas 900 is the correct figure.

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is certainly not within the ordinary compass of natural ability. There is no language which does not require about a year to learn it well. Anyone who at so tender an age knows twenty-two can be suspected of knowing them very badly, or rather of knowing the mere elements, which is to know nothing".<sup>41</sup> He is far, however, from under-rating the remarkable scholarship of one who was "from his tenderest youth a prodigy of studiousness and memory"<sup>42</sup>; and he adds: "in our own day he would have been a prodigy of genuine erudition".<sup>43</sup> It is plain from the evidence

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41. Voltaire: Oeuvres Complètes (1785), Vol. XVII, pp. 559 ff.: Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations, ch. cix.

"Cela n'est certainement pas dans le cours ordinaire de la nature. Il n'y a point de langue qui ne demande environ une année pour le bien savoir. Quiconque dans une si grande jeunesse en sait vingt-deux peut être soupçonner de les savoir bien mal, ou plutôt il en sait les éléments, ce qui est ne rien savoir".

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42. Ibid. " . . . des sa plus tendre jeunesse un prodige d'étude et de memoire".

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43. Ibid. " . . . il eût été dans nôtre temps un prodige de véritable érudition".

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available that, apart from Latin which he knew in common with other educated men and his native Italian, Pico's linguistic studies were concentrated in the main on Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic. There is a likelihood that he also gained some acquaintance with the French tongue, and no doubt in his far-reaching questings after knowledge he gleaned some smatterings in an incidental manner of other languages.

Attention has already been drawn to the influence of his Jewish friend Elia del Medigo, who during this very year (1486) spent much time with Pico in Perugia. During this year, too, he made the acquaintance while in Perugia of another Jewish scholar, Flavius Mithridates, and it was under him that he studied the three languages mentioned in his letter to Corneo. Flavius also assisted Pico by translating a number of cabalistic manuscripts into Latin for him. Two years later in Florence Pico formed a close friendship with Jochanan Alemannus, a Jewish mystic steeped in the learning and philosophy of both East and West. An inventory of Pico's private library has shown that it contained 124 Oriental books, of which <sup>0</sup>177 were Hebrew and 17 Aramaic and Arabic texts.<sup>44</sup>

During the Middle Ages the study of Hebrew had not

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<sup>44</sup>. Pearl Kibre: The Library of Pico della Mirandola (New York, 1936), pp.38 f.

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entirely died out, but it had remained at a very low ebb outside Jewish scholarly circles. In the thirteenth century a correction of the Vulgate version of the Bible was undertaken by Dominican scholars in Paris who compared the Latin with the Hebrew and Greek originals; but the work called forth the censure of Roger Bacon because of the incompetence of those who had produced it: being deficient in knowledge of Hebrew and Greek, their "correction" was "the worst possible corruption and destruction of the text of God". It was left to William de Mara, with the assistance of Bacon, to prepare a more reliable Correctorium, a task which took him a great many years. During this same century the still more ambitious enterprise of making a new Latin translation of the Old Testament from the original Hebrew was attempted by other English men of letters.

In the next century Nicholas de Lyra, a Franciscan like Roger Bacon, was a Hebrew scholar of repute whose expositions of the literal sense of Scripture were founded upon a study of the original text. In fifteenth century Italy Pico had been preceded by such Hebrew scholars as Nicholas Krebs (Cusanus), Ambrogio Traversari (Ambrose of Camaldoli), Poggio Bracciolini, and Gianozzo Manetti, Traversari's pupil who, at the instigation of Pope Nicolas V, wrote ten books in defence of Christianity against the Jews and commenced a translation of the

original text of the Bible into Latin. Pico's contemporaries, Marsilio Ficino and Angelo Poliziano, could also boast some knowledge of the Hebrew language. But it was Pico, none the less, who provided the stimulus for the reflorescence of Hebraic studies in the sixteenth century. The explanation of this is to be found in his confidently asserted claim that in the Cabala, that secret repository of Jewish mysticism, a complete vindication of the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith and at the same time a refutation from their own writings of the Jewish enemies of Christianity was ready to hand. This announcement fired the imagination of many scholars from John Reuchlin onwards and induced them to study the Hebrew language with the greatest diligence and seriousness.

During the same period as that in which his letter to Andrea Corneo was composed Pico wrote to Marsilio Ficino from Fratta, a favourite rural retreat of his near his native Mirandola, having temporarily deserted Perugia because of a suspected outbreak of the plague ("absum enim ob pestis suspicionem"). Ficino had asked Pico to let him have back a Latin translation of the Koran. "You could not have requested the return of your Latin version of Mahomet at a more suitable moment than the present", says Pico, "since I hope very shortly to be able to understand Mahomet speaking in his native tongue; for, after having devoted myself day and night for a whole month to the

study of Hebrew, I have now given myself up entirely to Arabic and Chaldean, confident of becoming no less proficient in them than I have become in Hebrew, in which I am now able to dictate a letter, if not so far with distinction, yet free from mistakes. See what force of mind together with toil and diligence can achieve, even where capacity is none of the strongest!"<sup>45</sup>

Some six years later, in a hurried note from Ferrara dated 30th May, 1492, he explains to his nephew why he has been unable to write sooner. "The reason why I have not answered your letter before this", he says, "is as follows: certain Hebrew books have come into my possession which I have been studying assiduously day and night for the past week, so much so that I have almost blinded myself; for the Sicilian Jew who brought the books with him intends to leave here within twenty days, and so you must not expect even a word from me while I am occupied with them. I dare not leave them for a moment, for fear lest they should be taken off before I have studied them right through. . . "<sup>46</sup> These extracts from his correspondence afford further evidence of the remarkable enthusiasm and intensity with which Pico applied himself to his studies.

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45. Opera Pici, p.367.

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46. Ibid., p.360.

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The Oriental studies which were thus to all intents and purposes reinstated by Pico with such zeal, after having been permitted to languish for some twelve centuries, were carried on by the great German hebraist Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522) who visited Italy twice during Pico's lifetime and was given a warm welcome by the distinguished leaders of the Florentine Academy. There he met and made friends with Pico, as well as with Lorenzo the Magnificent, Ficino, Poliziano, and other renowned literary figures, and it was there that the ambition to become a master of Hebrew and labour in the same cause with Pico was kindled within him. On the 29th of September, 1516, Erasmus wrote a letter of encouragement to a somewhat dispirited Reuchlin. "What!" he exclaims, "do you bemoan your misfortune! you who have seen Italy in that most fortunate age, in which Agricola, Poliziano, Ermolao, and Pico flourished, you who have acquired such varied and recondite learning, you who have enjoyed both the acquaintance and the friendship of such consummate men, and are so beloved by the best and most learned now living, that if you were their father, you could not be more intimately dear to them all. . . . I was visiting lately a very old Carthusian Monastery at St. Omer. The Prior of that house, by reading your books, without any other instructor, had obtained very considerable acquaintance with Hebrew, and was so devoted to you,

that your very name was an object of reverence. I happened to have with me a letter of yours; and when he saw your handwriting, he kissed it over and over again, and begged me most earnestly to leave it with him. There are many persons who have the same feeling about you. And if our own age is wanting in recognition, you will be acknowledged by Posterity, and what is more, you will be acknowledged by Christ, to whom your labours are devoted. . . Farewell, most learned Reuchlin".<sup>47</sup>

It was Reuchlin in turn who imparted the knowledge of Hebrew to his sister's grandson, the great scholar and reformer, Philip Melanchthon, as well as to many other eager students. Thus the work that Pico industriously and solitarily initiated was fruitfully prosecuted to the benefit of succeeding generations.

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47. Francis Morgan Nichols: The Epistles of Erasmus (1901), Ep. 459; Vol.II, pp.395 f. For the Latin, v. Allen: Erasmi Epistolae, Vol.II, p.350.

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CHAPTER IIITHE DIGNITY OF MAN

Let us now return to the letter addressed to Andrea Corneo which we interrupted in the last chapter. " . . . I intend soon to leave for Rome", writes Pico, "and to spend the winter there, provided nothing unforeseen makes it necessary for me to go elsewhere. Thence maybe you will hear what your friend Pico has achieved by contemplation in his sequestered and sedentary existence, and then at last the measure in which he stands in need (if I may speak with a note of arrogance) of literary help, since you promise him an abundance of learned men if he comes to that city". Pico's cryptic allusion to an expected vindication of the months spent in seclusion at Perugia during the year 1486 undoubtedly has reference to his Nine Hundred Theses which he was planning to publish and defend in the Italian capital.

Not, however, that this was to be the first publication from his pen, as a remark a little further on in the same letter indicates: "It is no use your inquiring anxiously after my Etruscan verses", he tells Corneo, "for I have long since turned my back on amatory triflings and have other things in contemplation". It was in 1479, during his first visit to Florence, that Pico, then sixteen years of age, had submitted to Angelo

Poliziano for his scrutiny and criticism a number of "Etruscan verses" - verses, that is, or love poems in the Italian vernacular. Poliziano generously praised these early creations of the youthful poet and encouraged him to further efforts. But subsequently, both because he was dissatisfied with the immaturity which marked their composition and also because he had since then revised and polished them and added others to their number, Pico wrote to his friend entreating him either to return these first literary essays of his or to destroy them.<sup>48</sup>

On the 12th of March, 1483<sup>49</sup>, Pico sent Poliziano the first of five booklets (with a promise to send the rest later) into which he had collected his love poems, requesting him to criticize them frankly, not as a flatterer but as a friend.<sup>50</sup> Poliziano wrote back graciously and approvingly, though indicating that in his

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48. Opera Pici, p.372.

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49. Garin: op.cit., p.4.

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50. Opera Pici, p.372. " . . . cum tenues Musas meas, quibus dum per aetatem licuit de amoribus meis iocatus sum, in libellos quinque digesserim, mitto ad te illorum primum, missurus reliquos, in hoc uno amicum experiar te, non assentatorem".

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judgment the verses were uneven in quality; and Pico seems to have experienced considerable gratification at the manner in which his "Loves" were received by his friend. "My Loves state that never have they been given a more gracious and cordial reception than that which you have just granted them", he writes to Poliziano; "they even congratulate themselves most warmly that they have met with friendly chastisement, and are most indebted to you".<sup>51</sup>

Notwithstanding this interchange, the day came when Pico committed his love poems to the flames. When this news reached Poliziano he surmized (in a letter sent to Pico) that he had done this fearing that the verses might be offensive to his own reputation or to the morals of others. Poliziano added that he could not persuade himself that Pico had destroyed these compositions, as Plato is said to have done his, through any idea of their being unworthy the public eye, for according to his recollections of them they could not have been more terse,

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51. Ibid., p.361. " . . . nec urbanus unquam nec hilarius acceptos se amores mei praedicant quam his proximis diebus apud te, et quod amice quidem confossi sunt cum sibi gratulantur maxime, tum tibi plurimum debent".

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more melodious, more attractive.<sup>52</sup> That it was the unsatisfactory moral tone of the love poems which caused Pico to destroy them is confirmed by his nephew, who tells us that Pico, besides being himself unusually attractive to women, had at first been very susceptible to feminine blandishments; but that after his conversion to Christ he turned his back on such things and sought to glorify God and to be of service to the Church. "He had amused himself", continues his nephew, "by writing five books of love poems in elegiac verse which, for the sake of religion, he committed to the flames, together with numerous others in Etruscan measure which he burnt for the same reason".<sup>53</sup>

Thus it was that on the 15th of October, 1486, he wrote to Andrea Corneo: "It is no use your inquiring anxiously after my Etruscan verses, for I have long since turned my back on amatory triflings and have other things

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52. Poliziano: Opera, p.6. "Audio te uersiculos amatorios, quos olim scripseras, combussisse: ueritum fortasse, ne uel tuo iam nomini, uel aliorum moribus officerent. Non enim puto, quoniam minus exierint apte, sicuti Plato suos dicitur. nam quantum repeto memoria, nihil illis tersius, dulcius, ornatius".

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53. Vita.

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in contemplation".<sup>54</sup> What were these "other things" which he was contemplating? A letter from Pico to Baldo, a friend in Perugia, throws some light on this question. The letter is undated, but internal evidence indicates that it must have been written during this particular sojourn in Fratta. Pico rejoices to learn that the plague at Perugia has been stayed, both because it meant that all would now be well with his friend, and also because he would be able to enjoy his company again all the sooner. In writing, however, Baldo had mentioned the threat of war, and this had caused Pico much distress. In the emotion of the moment he had composed a poem advocating peace ("pro pace") and sent it, without delaying to revise or polish it, with his reply to Baldo. The "pro pace extemporaneum carmen" is no longer extant and seems never to have been published. Together with it he sent a poem on love ("de amore") which had come into his possession, written in the Italian vernacular. It was a poem which he felt was unlikely to be understood except by a few, for it was filled with numerous mysteries from the

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54. Opera Pici, loc. cit. "Rhythmos meos Hetruscos non est quod desideres; iamdudum amatoriis lusibus nuncium remisimus, alia meditantes".

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esoteric philosophy of the ancients.<sup>55</sup>

Pico had also told Corneo (in the letter to which we have already referred more than once) that before long their compatriots would be reading something on the subject of love which hitherto had not been available to them.<sup>56</sup> The carmen de amore to which he alludes in these two letters is beyond doubt the Platonist Canzona de Amore of Girolamo Benivieni, or, to give it its full title, Canzona de Amore composta per Hieronymo Benivieni Cittadino Fiorentino secondo la mente e opinione de' Platonicis. It was during his first visit to Florence in 1479 that Pico's close friendship with Girolamo Benivieni had had its commencement. One of the "other things" which was engaging his attention in 1486 was a commentary, in Italian, which he was composing on Benivieni's poem. Actually, the Commento which he wrote falls into two parts, the first being a philosophical essay on the Platonic idea of love, and the second constituting the commentary proper.

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55. " . . . de amore carmen . . . a paucis, nisi fallor, intelligendum: est enim pluribus ex secretiori antiquorum philosophia refertum". The text of the letter is given by L. Dorez: Lettres inédites de Jean Pic de la Mirandole (1482-1492) in Giornale storico della Letteratura italiana, Vol. XXV (1895), pp.357 f.

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56. Loc. cit. " . . . forsan paulo mox legent nostri homines de amore (uide quid dicam) quae nondum leguntur"

On the 10th of November, 1486, less than a month after his letter to Andrea Corneo, Pico wrote to Domenico Benivieni, Girolamo's brother, in the following terms:

"If your brother has been so generous as to say anything in commendation of me, you may be sure that it should be attributed to the warmth of his friendship rather than to any concern for accuracy. My little commentary (commentariolum nostrum) is unlikely to elicit your admiration, since I composed it at a time when I wished for leisure and inactivity, in a period of relaxation rather than concentration of the mind. It is, as a matter of fact, a prelude to a series of commentaries on Plato's Symposium which I have in mind".<sup>57</sup>

The further commentaries do not seem to have materialized, but a comparison of the Commento with Pico's subsequent publications shows that it was indeed a prelude or sort of preliminary canter to the accomplishment of the programme of work which he had set before himself. Most of the elements are there - Platonic, Neoplatonic, Oriental, cabalistic - which were to find fuller expression in the De Hominis Dignitate, in the Nine Hundred Theses and Apologia, in the Heptaplus and the De Ente et Uno.

It was perhaps because he regarded it purely as a

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57. Opera Pici, p.382.

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preliminary essay that Pico held back the manuscript of the Commento from publication. Ficino, however, writing to Germano di Ganai after Pico's death<sup>58</sup> and claiming to have a knowledge of Pico's wishes in this matter ("noui equidem ultimam pii hominis uoluntatem"), asserts that it was a composition of fervid adolescence which later the author's maturer judgment condemned, so much so that he desired to destroy it; he adds that to publish it would only result in injury to Pico's name. Garin suggests<sup>59</sup> that Ficino opposed the publication of the Commento for personal reasons, since he had no liking for Pico's criticisms. It is at any rate evident that Ficino's scruples were not shared by Pico's nephew, who wished to bring out a Latin translation of the Commento, both because of his estimate of its intrinsic worth and also with a view to ensuring "that the lofty teaching of so great a man concerning these matters, at present entirely available to all and sundry,<sup>60</sup> might be removed from the gaze of the vulgar mob".<sup>61</sup>

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58. The letter is given in Opera Pici, pp.405 ff., and is wrongly dated the 23rd March, 1494: the year should be corrected to read 1495. Pico died on the 17th of November, 1494.

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59. Garin: op.cit., p.12.

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60. I.e. because ~~they were~~ written by Pico in the vernacular.

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61. Vita.

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Certainly there is nothing in the Commento of a scandalous nature, as there was, presumably, in the earlier love poems which Pico had destroyed; nor are its contents likely to have threatened injury to the author's reputation in any other respect. If there is any substance in Ficino's statement that Pico desired the complete destruction of the Commento ("uoluitque penitus aboleri"), it is at least surprising, firstly, that Pico should not have dealt with it as summarily as he did with his "Loves", and, secondly, that Gian Francesco, who enjoyed an access into his uncle's counsels more intimate than was permitted to Ficino, should not only have failed to mention Pico's wishes concerning this treatise, but should also have contemplated reproducing it in a Latin translation.

There was at least one other of Pico's writings which was withheld from publication during his lifetime, namely, his Oration on the Dignity of Man (Oratio de Hominis Dignitate) which was composed during the same period (1486) as the Commento and the Nine Hundred Theses. It was, in fact, intended to be delivered as the oration introducing the public disputation of the Nine Hundred Theses; but as this debate never took place, so too the introductory discourse was never delivered. This, no doubt, is the chief reason why Pico did not publish the De Hominis Dignitate, though it must be added that a considerable section of it was incorporated by him in the

text of his Apologia. His nephew, however, published it in full in the Opera, stating in his preface to the work that in doing so he had yielded to the frequent requests of celebrated men, even though it was uncertain whether Pico would have committed it to print had he lived longer. It is, he admits, a product of Pico's youthful eagerness, but none the less a most elegant oration admired by men of learning for the high quality of its erudition and eloquence.<sup>62</sup> Humanists of later times have likewise eulogized the De Hominis Dignitate. Thus Burckhardt has declared that it "may justly be called one of the noblest bequests of that great age";<sup>63</sup> and Symonds speaks of it as combining "antique liberty of thought with Christian faith in a style distinctive of the Renaissance at its best".<sup>64</sup>

Continuing his preface, Pico's nephew observes that much from the concluding portion of the De Hominis Dignitate was inserted in the proem of the Apologia when the letter

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62. Opera Pici, p.313. "Accipe lector et has Ioannis Pici Mirandulae lucubrationes leuioris curae opera, quas forte nec ipse inuulgasset, nec nos nisi celebratorum hominum adhortamentis excitati. Leges primum orationem elegantissimam iuuenili quidem alacritate dictatam, sed a doctioribus prae doctrinae et eloquentiae fastigio admiratam".

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63. J. Burckhardt: The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, translated by S.G.C.Middlemore, pp.352 f. (London, 1929).

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64. J.A.Symonds: The Renaissance in Italy, volume entitled "The Revival of Learning", p.35 (London, 1909).

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was published; otherwise the De Hominis<sup>s</sup> Dignitate was shown to none except to friends in private. "You will find", he says, "many abstruse doctrines of the ancients which previously were conveyed with great subtlety in enigmas and under cover of fables; you will find that he has endeavoured to demonstrate how both in essence and in terminology the poetic theology of the pristine sages is the handmaid of the mysteries of our own theology; and, after unravelling certain knotty points of each, you will find him inviting men to meet him in the literary arena. For at this stage he spent most of his time in these things which he afterwards left behind, viewing them as a mere prelude to more serious studies and as laughable contests".<sup>65</sup>

Pico opens the De Hominis Dignitate by remarking that he had read in the Arabian records that Abdala the Saracen, upon being asked what in this worldly sphere was most deserving of admiration, replied that there is nothing to be found more admirable than man - a sentiment with which, says Pico, the dictum of Hermes Trismegistus is consonant: "magnum, o Asclepi, miraculum est homo".<sup>66</sup> Pico, however,

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65. Loc. cit.

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66. V. Corpus Hermeticum, Tome II, p.301, ed. A.D.Nock (Paris, 1945), where the text is given as follows: "propter haec, o Asclepi, magnum miraculum est homo, animal adorandum atque honorandum". This quotation appears again, together with a summary statement of the argument developed here, in the Heptaplus, V, vi - Opera Pici, pp.38 ff.

regards as inadequate the reasons assigned by many of the ancients for the eminence of man, such as, that he is the link between heavenly and earthly creatures, the familiar of the superior beings and the ruler of the lower beings; or that he is the interpreter of nature, thanks to the acuteness of his senses, the discernment of his reason, and the light of his intellect; or that he stands midway between changeless eternity and fleeting time, the copula (as the Persians say) or the marriage-point of the universe; or that his position is, as David declares, but a little lower than that of the angels.<sup>67</sup>

Great though these considerations are, they are not, in Pico's view, the clinching ones; if they were, should not the angels and the beatific choirs of heaven demand an admiration greater than is accorded to man? "God, the supreme Father and Architect", explains Pico, "had already compounded this mundane dwelling-place which we see, the illustrious temple of His divinity, in accordance with the laws of His secret wisdom. He adorned the supercelestial region with intelligences; He animated the ethereal spheres with eternal souls; He filled the base and filthy inferior parts of the world with a

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<sup>Psalm viii. 5.</sup>  
67. [For the text of the De Hominis Dignitate v. Opera Pici, pp. 313 ff.

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The nature of all other things is restricted and confined within laws which I have prescribed; but you, compelled by no restraints, shall determine your own nature by the exercise of your free will to which I have committed you. I have set you at the centre of the universe so that thence you may the more easily observe what is in the universe. I have made you a being neither celestial nor terrestrial, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may more freely and honourably shape yourself in whatever form you prefer, the moulder and fashioner, as it were, of your own self. It will be possible for you to degenerate into the lower forms of being, which are brutish; it will be possible for you, by the determination of your soul, to be regenerated into the superior forms of being, which are divine".

"O the supreme liberality of our Father God!" exclaims Pico devoutly; "O the supreme and amazing blessedness of man, to whom it is granted to have that which he chooses and to be that which he wills!" It is otherwise with the beasts, for from the moment of their birth they carry with themselves that which they shall possess in the future; and it is otherwise with the highest spiritual beings which from the beginning, or soon after, become what they are destined to be for all eternity. But the Creator endowed man at his birth with the seeds of all things and the germs of every type of life; and

whatever seeds each man cultivates, those will grow up and bring forth their own fruit in him. If they are vegeta<sup>tive</sup>~~bles~~, he will become like a plant; if sensual, he will become brutish; if rational, he will emerge as a celestial being; if intellectual, he will be an angel and a son of God. He may even surpass all these if, content with the lot of no other creature, he withdraws himself into the centre of his own unity, uniting his spirit to God in the solitary darkness of the Father,<sup>69</sup> who presides over all things. "Who will not admire this our chameleon?" demands the youthful philosopher; "indeed, who will admire anything more than man?"

It is not clear whether at this stage of his career Pico favoured the Orphic conception of the transmigration of souls, though he does not fail to remark that "the Pythagoreans degrade wicked men into brutes and, if Empedocles may be credited, even into plants".<sup>70</sup> But,

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69. " . . . in solitaria Patris caligine". This mystical concept recurs, as we shall see, and is elaborated in the De Ente et Uno, where Pico speaks of caligo quam Deus inhabitat and diuini splendoris caligo.

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70. Empedocles: Fragm. 117, in Hermann Diels: Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiken, Vol. I, p. 359:

ἦ δὲ γὰρ ποτ' ἐγὼ γενόμεν κούρεος τε κόρη τε  
 Θάμνος τ' οἰωνός τε καὶ ἕξ' ἄλλος ἄλλοπος ἰχθύς.

Cf. also Plato: Republ., X, 620A f.; Tim., 42B f.; Phaedo, 81D-83E, 113A; Phaedrus, 248B-249B.

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whatever his views on metempsychosis, the present metaphorical force of such terminology is what he stresses here. "If you see anyone abandoned to sensuality crawling on the ground", he says, "it is not a man but a plant that you see; if you see anyone blinded, like Calypso, by the empty delusions of fancy and, ensnared by gnawing desire, a slave to his passions, it is not a man but a brute that you see; if you see a philosopher discerning all things by right reason, him you should venerate, for he is a celestial and not a terrestrial being; and if you see a contemplator, unconcerned with the body and transported into the innermost recesses of the mind, this is a being neither terrestrial nor celestial, but a nobler spirit clothed with human flesh".

He adds a plea for a certain holy ambition ("sacra quaedam ambitio") whereby, dissatisfied with mediocrities, we may aspire to those things which are highest. "We can if we wish", he admonishes ("possumus si uolumus"). Despising all else, we should fly off to that court which is beyond our world and nearest to the supreme divinity, where seraphim, cherubim, and thrones occupy the first place. If our will is such, we shall be in no way inferior to them ("erimus illis, cum uoluerimus, nihilo inferiores").

The sentiments voiced by Pico in this opening section of his oration are simply those of a noble paganism. His concept of human dignity is strongly Platonic, and there is

that seeing all things he might admire all things'".<sup>71</sup>

Already, in the first book of the Commento, Pico had spoken in similar terms: "The nature of man", he affirmed, "as though a link and bond of the world, is placed in a central position in the universe; and just as every medium participates in the extremes, so man by the variety of his parts has communion and affinity with all the parts of the world, for which reason it is customary to call him a microcosm, that is, a little world".<sup>72</sup> This doctrine of man as the microcosm, the world in miniature, recurs in the Heptaplus (written in 1489) where not only is man described as paruus mundus, but the universe is called magnus homo. The doctrine is found, of course, away back in presocratic philosophy. But it held a special attraction for the thinkers of the Renaissance period who believed that in man they had discovered the key to the understanding of the universe

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71. Lactantius: Instit., VII, 13.

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72. "La natura dell'uomo, quasi vincolo e nodo del mondo, è collocata nel grado mezzo dell'universo; e come ogni mezzo partecipa de gli extremi, così l'uomo per diverse sue parte con tutte le parti del mondo ha comunione e convenienza, per la quale cagione si suole chiamare Microcosmo, cioè uno piccolo mondo". I have followed Garin's orthography: op.cit., p.478.

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In his announcement of the unique dignity of man Pico was no pioneer. Ficino, from whom he learnt much in philosophy, had propounded the same views, and so also had Nicolas of Cusa. In the middle years of the fifteenth century Bartolomeo Fazio had written a treatise entitled De Excellentia ac Praestantia Hominis, and Gianozzo Manetti followed suit by composing his De Dignitate et Excellentia Hominis. Cusanus, Fazio, Manetti, and Ficino were Pico's more immediate literary forebears in this connection. The nobility of man was such, according to them, as to make the incarnation entirely congruous with the splendour of human nature. Union with God was man's just desert; indeed, it was a necessary consequence of his dignity, so much so that even if Adam had never sinned the incarnation would still have taken place. That Pico concurred with this sentiment when he wrote the De Hominis Dignitate is shown by one of his Nine Hundred Theses, which were composed at the same period: "Had Adam not sinned, God would have been incarnate but not crucified".<sup>73</sup> The fact that this thesis was not amongst those which were condemned as heretical indicates how commonly accepted <sup>able</sup> this idea was to the medieval Church.

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73. Opera Pici, p.94. "Si non peccasset Adam, Deus fuisset incarnatus sed non crucifixus". This was number 15 of "conclusiones in theologia XXIX secundum opinionem propriam a communi modo dicendi theologorum satis diuersam".

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Even Thomas Aquinas, the Church's "Angelic Doctor", had been unable to reach a clear decision on this point. Although he held that it was more in accordance with Scripture "to say that the work of the incarnation was ordained by God as a remedy for sin, so that, had sin not existed, the incarnation would not have taken place", yet he hesitated so far as to admit that even if sin had not existed God could have become incarnate.<sup>74</sup> For the rest, however, Pico's position was substantially similar to that of Aquinas, as the following passage from the Summa Theologica will show: "Man does not possess a natural knowledge of all natural things, but is in a manner composed of all things, since he has in himself a rational soul of the genus of spiritual substances, and in likeness to the heavenly bodies he is removed from contraries by an equable temperament. . . . For this reason man is called a lesser world (minor mundus), because all the creatures of the world are in a way found in him".<sup>75</sup> Not long was to elapse before Pico was to adopt a much humbler view of man and his abilities. This is apparent in the Heptaplus in which he emphasizes the infirmity of human nature apart from the help

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<sup>74</sup>. Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologica, pt.III, q.1, art.3.

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<sup>75</sup>. Ibid., pt.I, q.91, art.1.

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and grace of God, and quotes the apostolic saying that "our sufficiency is of God".<sup>76</sup> Pico became increasingly aware of this truth during the later stages of his brief course.

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76. Opera Pici, p.44; Heptaplus, VI,5; 2 Corinthians iii.5.

CHAPTER IVTHE ADVANCE TO ROME

It was towards the end of 1486 that Pico completed the compilation of his Nine Hundred Theses. On the 12th of November of that year he wrote from Fratta to his friend Girolamo Benivieni to say that since the latter's last visit the number of the propositions for public debate had grown from 700 to 900 and, indeed, that they would have increased to a thousand had he not called a halt.<sup>77</sup> He adds that the symbolism of numbers also seemed to him to indicate that 900 was a good stopping-point, as mystically signifying the soul that is excited by the frenzy of the Muses returning into itself<sup>78</sup> - an indication of the importance which he at that time attached to the significance and potency of numbers.

Two days previously, in replying to a letter received from an unknown friend, he makes it evident that all was now in readiness for his grand venture. He would answer

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77. L. Dorez: Lettres inédites, p.358. "Disputanda per me publice dogmata ante tuum a me discessum 700 is claudebantur. Postquam abisti ad 900 excreuerunt progrediebanturque, nisi receptui cecinissem, ad mille".

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78. Ibid. "Placuit in eo numero, utpote mistico, pedem sistere: est enim (si uera est nostra de numeris doctrina) symbolum animae in se ipsam oestro Musarum percitae recurrentis".

the points raised by his correspondent in greater detail, he says, were it not that his books were no longer to hand, but had preceded him to Rome, like forerunners ahead of their master ("me illi iam Romam quasi anteaambulones dominum praecesserunt"), and that he himself was on the point of setting off for the capital.<sup>79</sup> To another friend, Thaddeo Ugolino, he writes excitedly: "I am hurrying off to Rome where I am about to put my learning to the test, though to do so may well prove hazardous" ("Romam propero ubi de nostris studiis periculum, uel cum periculo, faciemus").<sup>80</sup> The play upon words in the Latin bespeaks an insouciant confidence in the heart of the young scholar who was thus zestfully on the point of galloping into the academic lists. Nor should we write off his evident self-assurance as the conceit of an immature youth: it was not without stern preparation and prolonged discipline that he was now, as he believed, ready to pit his erudition against that of the intellectual leaders of his day. His great natural abilities had been fostered and improved by the closest application to studies which were extensive as well as

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79. Opera Pici, p.385.

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80. Ibid., p.366.

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deep, and the moment of conquest towards which he had been moving intellectually he now felt to be at hand. At the same time, however, we should not discount his nephew's statement (for it is doubtless a record of what Pico himself told him in later years) that in making this sally to Rome he was impelled by a desire for the praise and glory of men, for (the comment is added) the love of God had not as yet been kindled in his breast ("humanae laudis et gloriae cupidus, nondum enim diuino amore caluerat").<sup>81</sup>

And so it was that in the month of November, 1486, Pico set out for Rome intent on winning the acclaim of the universe of letters. Upon arrival in the capital he affixed copies of his Nine Hundred Theses in the city's prominent places and also circulated them through all the universities of the land, offering to debate them publicly with all comers. Their author undertook to postpone the public disputation until after Epiphany (January 6), 1487, and declared his willingness to defray from his own pocket the expenses of those who should travel from a distance to accept

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81. Vita.

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his challenge.<sup>82</sup> In this way the youthful philosopher hoped to ensure that every scholar of repute in the whole country would be present to lend lustre to the hour of his triumph.

In his theses Pico purported to deal with every branch of knowledge ("de omni re scibili") and their comprehensive scope may be gauged from the prefatory paragraph with which they were introduced: "John Pico of Mirandola, Count of Concord, will debate in public the accompanying nine hundred opinions - dialectical,

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82. "Conclusiones non disputabuntur nisi post Epiphaniam. Interim publicabuntur in omnibus Italiae gymnasiis; et si quis philosophus aut theologus ab extrema Italia, arguendi gratis, Romam uenire uoluerit, ipse pollicetur Dominus disputaturus se uiatici expensas illi soluturum de suo".

This guarantee is printed in the early editions of the Opera. It is confirmed by Pico's nephew in the Vita: ". . . cunctaque simul publicis locis, quo facilius uulgarentur, affixit, pollicitus se soluturum eis impensas qui ex remotis oris disceptandi gratia Romam se contulissent".

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ethical, physical, mathematical, metaphysical, theological, magical, cabalistic - ~~not~~ his own <sup>as well as</sup> ~~only~~ ~~but~~ those also of the Chaldean, Arabian, Hebrew, Greek, Egyptian, and Latin sages".<sup>83</sup> It should be added that Pico had taken care to seek and obtain the permission of Pope Innocent VIII to display his Nine Hundred Theses for public disputation, promising at the same time to submit them to any correction which the Apostolic See might impose - a fact of which he was later reminded by Alexander VI in a papal edict dated the 18th of June, 1493.<sup>84</sup>

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83. Opera Pici, p.42. "De adscriptis numero noningentis Dialecticis, Moralibus, Physicis, Mathematicis, Metaphysicis, Theologicis, Magicis, Cabalisticis, cum suis tum sapientium Chaldaeorum, Arabum, Hebraeorum, Graecorum, Aegyptiorum, Latinorumque placitis, disputabit publice Ioannes Picus Mirandulanus, Concordiae Comes".

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84. "Cum primum ad Innocentium Papam VIII praedecessor<sup>e</sup>um nostrum et Romam curiam te contulisses, et noningentas in theologia et aliis facultatibus conclusiones, ex permissione praefati praedecessoris, publice (ut moris est) disputandas affixisses, quas sub Apostolicae sedis correctione te sustentare offerebas . . ." The text of this edict is prefixed to the Opera Pici.

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The latter portion of the theses, comprising five hundred original propositions ("conclusiones numero quingentae secundum opinionem propriam"), is introduced with an avowal of subservience to the judgment of Church and Pope: in these propositions, he says, "I posit nothing assertively or as probable except in so far as it is judged to be true or probable by the sacrosanct Roman Church and by him who is deservedly its head, the supreme pontiff Innocent the Eighth, to whose judgment not to submit one's mind is to show that one has no mind".<sup>85</sup>

Pico, however, was doomed to disappointment. Epiphany, 1487, dawned and passed, and, though he waited the best part of a year in Rome, the day of the great debate never arrived. And as the weeks went by so his hopes dwindled with them. So far from taking the academic citadels by storm, all that he succeeded in doing was to stir up a hornet's nest of disgruntled objectors. It seems that these were, for the most part, men who by a

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85. Opera Pici, p.56. " . . . nihil assertive uel probabiliter pono, nisi quatenus id uel uerum uel probabile iudicat sacrosancta Romana Ecclesia et caput eius bene meritum summus Pontifex Innocentius octauus, cuius iudicio qui mentis suae iudicium non summittit, mentem non habet".

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variety of shifts had built up a flimsy reputation for learning and who were much alarmed lest the shallowness of their scholarship should be exposed and the bubble of their self-esteem pricked by the more substantial scholarship of a mere youth. Certainly, if this was their fear, it was probably also Pico's hope, for, as he himself says, he came to Rome with the intention of performing something that proportionate to his own ability would be worthy of that great capital, acceptable to the supreme pontiff, and of value to himself and to scholars.<sup>86</sup>

Scarcely, however, had his theses appeared in public, he complains, than a motley mob of detractors emerged ("obtrektorum turba multiplex assurrexit"), secret mutterers ("summuosores") who carried on a furtive campaign of jealous hostility.<sup>87</sup> Pico's nephew expresses strong disapproval of the methods whereby the proposed debate was opposed and prevented. "These

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86. Ibid., p.114. "Cum nuper Romam uenisset . . . ut . . . rem facerem pro uiribus dignam urbe Roma, gratiam principi Christiano, utilem mihi et studiosis, nongentas de diuinis et naturalibus rebus quaestiones proposui, ad quas, in publico doctissimorum hominum concessu, essem responsurus",

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87. Ibid.

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wranglers", he says, "did not dare to attack him openly and in free discussion, but attempted to disparage him by underhand trickery and to undermine his position by furtive devices, infected (as most people believed them to be) with mischievous envy".<sup>88</sup> To achieve their end Pico's calumniators raised the alarm that several of the theses smelt of heresy and persuaded some well-intentioned but uninstructed men to join cause with them, winning them over by showing them that Pico had introduced for discussion matters and names which were entirely foreign to their ears, and which thus conveyed the suspicion of dangerous innovation. Those whose zeal had been aroused by this means were not, however, excusable on the grounds of their ignorance, since the theses had been approved and subscribed as sound and wholesome by not a few celebrated doctors of theology.<sup>89</sup> One thing is certain: Pico's own friends never ceased to believe in him; indeed, throughout the clouded and unsettled months that followed, Pico never lacked the affectionate support and encouragement of those in Italy and France whose judgment and friendship he valued most. The sequence of events during this ill-starred period of his life is given in some detail by Dorez and Thuasne

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88. Vita.

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89. Ibid. " . . . quas tamen quaestiones non pauci et quidem celebrati theologiae doctores ceu pias et mundas prius

in their book Pic de la Mirandole en France (1485-1488).

But the storm clouds did not gather all at once. On arrival in Rome he was warmly received at the papal court and, himself the possessor of a library that justly became renowned, was accorded free use of the Vatican library. In view of the subsequent publication of his De Ente et Uno and the twelve-volume Disputatio in Astrologiam, it is interesting to find that on December 24, 1486, he borrowed the treatise De Ente et Essentia of Thomas Aquinas, and on January 3, 1487, Roger Bacon's work on astrology. Meanwhile his enemies were assiduously urging the charge of heresy against certain of his theses, and finally the Pope felt bound, despite his goodwill towards Pico and his patron Lorenzo the Magnificent, to pay attention to an accusation of such gravity. Accordingly on the 20th of February he constituted a commission for the examination of those propositions which were suspect. This commission consisted of sixteen members under the presidency of Jean Monissart, Bishop of Tournai, and its first session was held in the Vatican on the 2nd of March. Even so, Pico was able to borrow Henry of Bath's Speculum Naturalium from the Vatican library four days after this date. It is significant, perhaps, that thereafter there is no further record in the library registers of any books being taken out by him.

At length, their examination of Pico and his theses completed, the commission announced its verdict that thirteen of the propositions were heretical or savoured of heresy, the sole dissentient from this judgment being Jean Cordier, who later became Rector of the University of Paris. Pico's rejoinder to this was the publication, at the end of May, of his Apologia, and elaborate defence of his own position and of the condemned theses. A couple of months later, on the 4th of August, Innocent VIII promulgated a bull inhibiting the Nine Hundred Theses, and Pico, harassed and despondent, but anticipating sympathy and understanding from his Parisian friends, set off for France. He was soon followed, however, by papal letters requiring his arrest. It is not our intention to attempt a description of these unhappy days when Pico was a fugitive from the officers of the Pope, nor of the detentions, escapes, and vicissitudes which he experienced during the course of these months. It need only be said that all along he had influential friends both in Italy and France who courageously advocated his freedom and the rescinding of the judgment which had been given against him.

The representations of Pico's supporters failed to make Innocent VIII change his mind about the proscription of the theses; even the petitions of Lorenzo, whose daughter had married one of Innocent's sons, were of no avail. It was probably not until the spring of 1488

that Pico's exile in France was terminated, and then only through his managing to escape in disguise across the border to Turin. On the 30th of May in that year Marsilio Ficino wrote him a letter assuring him of Lorenzo's constancy in friendship and approval of his conduct, and urging him to return to Florence and take his place as one of themselves. "Florentinus esto!" exhorted the great Platonic scholar.<sup>90</sup> Pico and his advocates had to wait until the death of Innocent VIII before their hopes of obtaining a bull of absolution were realized. This long desired document was issued on the 18th of June, 1493, within the first year of the pontificate of Innocent's successor, Alexander VI.

In this certificate of acquittal Alexander VI reminded Pico, as we have seen, that in offering his theses for public disputation he had undertaken to submit obediently to any correction which Pope or Church might enjoin, and yet, upon the condemnation of certain of them, had published an Apologia justifying himself and repudiating the papal interdict. None the less, Alexander hereby annulled the judgment of his predecessor and formally absolved Pico of every charge that had been preferred

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90. Ficino: Opera, Vol. I, p. 888.

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against him. And so in the end Pico's long battle for independence of thought and expression ended in his favour; but in June, 1493, when he was thirty years of age, the Nine Hundred Theses were more of an unhappy memory than a living issue in his intellectual development, and his interests were moving increasingly in other directions. The facile manner in which Alexander reversed the solemn pronouncement of his predecessor, and that too in a matter so serious as heresy, is not only characteristic of a number of similar incidents in the history of the conduct of those who have occupied the pontifical throne, but also a sufficient commentary on the reliability and consistency, not to mention the infallibility, of the judgments which emanate from that source.

Already in his Apologia (as we shall see later) Pico propounds the doctrine of the ultimate authority of Holy Scripture and frankly exposes the fact that the writings of the fathers and doctors of the Church, though so widely venerated, are by no means free from contradictions and inconsistencies. In this, no doubt, we may discern the influence of his friendship with Savonarola, coupled with the critical independence of his own researches. But it was not until the following century that the principles of the supreme authority of Scripture as the Word of God and the right of private judgment were to come to full expression. Then, under the leadership of the Reformers,

they were to be proclaimed in no uncertain terms.

Pico's attention had been arrested by Girolamo Savonarola's startling denunciations of the corrupt state of the Italian Church; but, lone figure though Savonarola was, criticism of papal and ecclesiastical excesses was no new thing, for here and there and from time to time voices had been raised in protest. In the previous century, for instance, Pierre d'Ailly, chancellor of the University of Paris, and the young scholar Jean Gerson, who in 1395, at the age of thirty-two, was to succeed his teacher in this dignified office, had declared the independence of their university in matters of faith and morals and repudiated certain of the dogmas of Pope John XXII as heretical. In doing this they were in effect reaffirming the judgment of a former rector of Paris University, the Italian Marsiglio of Padua (1270-1342), who in his work entitled Defensor Pacis had maintained the democratic rights of the people as against the authoritarian claims of the papacy, and urged that the supreme authority of the Church should be vested in councils summoned by the emperor, and not in the Pope. Although Marsiglio did not see in his own day the realization of the reforms he had boldly advocated, his book subsequently came into the hands of John Wyclif and, later still, of Martin Luther, and thus played its part as a tributary to the stream of the Reformation. Marsiglio of Padua enjoyed the powerful

support of the English scholastic philosopher William of Ockham in his criticisms of the papal system. During the 1330's Ockham published several works directed against Pope John XXII and his errors, and followed these by his Super Potestate Summi Pontificis Octo Quaestionum Decisiones and the Dialogus in which he too defended the principle of ecclesiastical democracy and pressed for the holding of councils at regular intervals. The degree to which his writings may have influenced Luther in his reforming work is a matter for debate, but the influence of his thought in the University of Paris was very considerable.

Jean Gerson proved himself a tenacious leader in the conciliar movement, and it was due to the perseverance of him and other like-minded men that the Council of Constance was held, 1415-1418. Its objective was thoroughgoing reform of the Church - tam in capite quam in membris. The delegates unanimously asserted the fallibility of popes both in faith and morals and the competence of a general council to correct, condemn, or depose the Bishop of Rome. Prelatical avarice and simony were denounced, and the prevailing corruption of the Church was exposed in the frankest terms, especially as attested by the profligacy, gluttony, idleness, ignorance, and unspirituality of bishops, clergy, monks, and nuns alike. All, however, was to little purpose, since, though the

dangerously advanced condition of the Church's disease was sufficiently apparent, it was not until the next century that Christian men discerning enough to discover the remedy and strong enough to apply it appeared on the scene - with <sup>the</sup> exception of the Bohemian John Hus who, like the Englishman John Wyclif in the preceding century, was endowed with true reforming insight as well as zeal. It is an eloquent commentary on the muddled perspectives of the time that the councillors of Constance, while clamouring for the reform of the grievous abuses which were throttling the spiritual life of the Church, yet should themselves have been so blinded by prejudice as not to be able to recognize in Wyclif and Hus genuine friends and promoters of their cause. The teachings of the former they condemned as erroneous, and the latter, lured to Constance by the Emperor Sigismund's assurance of a safe-conduct and a fair hearing, they burnt as a heretic after a travesty of a trial. It is small wonder that the Council of Constance had little to show in the way of solid fruits and that the abuses which it had deplored were still flourishing in Pico's day.

That there was nothing startlingly unusual in Pico's having issued a challenge to all comers to debate his Nine Hundred Theses with him in public is apparent, apart from other evidence, from a brief parenthesis in the edict of Pope Alexander VI to which we have already

referred. In this document the Pope speaks of Pico's having arrived in Rome and, with his predecessor's permission, having displayed his theses for public disputation, "as is customary" ("ut moris est"). It is unnecessary to suppose, as some have done, that Pico was indebted to his Parisian visit for the idea of the public disputation, for such intellectual contests were by no means unknown in Italy.

Tradition has it that at Paris within the space of a single day Duns Scotus, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, successfully defended the dogma of the Immaculate Conception against two hundred objections and thereby earned the title of Doctor Subtilis. His pupil Francis of Mayrone is said to have introduced the method of disputation known as the actus Sorbonicus in which a scholar defended a particular tenet against all comers. Francis was known as Magister Acutus and Doctor Illuminatus, so great were his ability and reputation in this form of debate. In 1445, Fernando of Cordova, an adolescent prodigy from Spain, arrived in Paris to fulfil a promise to undertake a public debate at the university with any who cared to oppose him. But either his courage or his wits failed him and he was arrested for defaulting.

In Italy, Pico's contemporary the Jewish scholar Elia del Medigo got into trouble in 1485 as the result of

a decision he had given as arbiter in a philosophical disputation at the University of Padua, and was glad to accept the protection and hospitality of Pico in Florence. Some eight years later, Cajetan (Tommaso de Vio Gaetani) won fame at a general chapter of the Dominican Order held in Ferrara by successfully defending a number of theses in opposition to a group of distinguished antagonists amongst whom Pico was included - and Cajetan was Pico's junior by six years.

Of those who tried their fortune at this type of intellectual contest during the following century mention may be made of Paolo de la Scala (Paul Skalich), a literary knave, who at Bologna in 1553 offered 1553 theses for public disputation on the first of April, which, it has been remarked, "was an appropriate enough day for the purpose".<sup>91</sup> His plan to debate no less than twelve thousand theses at Rome was forestalled by the Jesuits after a commission appointed by them had found that he was "deficient in the fundamentals of theology, philosophy and even grammar".<sup>92</sup> Paolo had described his 1553 propositions as "divine, angelic, celestial, elemental,

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91. Lynn Thorndike: A History of Magic and Experimental Science, Vol.VI, p.455 (New York, 1941).

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92. Ibid.

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human, Christian, philosophical, metaphysical, physical, moral, rational, doctrinal, secret, and infernal" - a professed universality of scope somewhat reminiscent of the catholicity of Pico's Nine Hundred Theses: he was, in fact, accused by Johann Wier, physician to the Duke of Cleves, of having plagiarized from the work of Pico. Unlike Paolo de la Scala, however, Pico was no mountebank.

No posting up of propositions for public disputation is more renowned than that of Martin Luther when, on All Saints' Day, October 31, 1517, he affixed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Schlosskirche in Wittenberg. This was not the first time that Luther had ventured to invite public debate in this manner. A few months previously he had proposed ninety-seven theses which were intended to assail the nominalist philosophy of the Schoolmen; but to no avail, for, despite careful preparation, not a single person showed the slightest interest in his challenge. The Ninety-Five Theses were a similar failure: not one disputant was forthcoming to join issue with the Reformer. What set Germany afire with excitement was not this act, but the translation of the theses into the vernacular from the Latin and then the printing and dissemination of hundreds of copies throughout the land. This historic document was introduced with the following words: "Disputation of Dr. Martin Luther concerning Penance and Indulgences.

In the desire and with the purpose of elucidating the truth, a disputation will be held on the underwritten propositions at Wittenberg under the presidency of the Rev. Father Martin Luther, Monk of the Order of St. Augustine, Master of Arts and of Sacred Theology, and ordinary Reader of the same in that place. He therefore asks that those who cannot be present and discuss the subject with us orally, to do so by letter in their absence. . . ."93. But though Luther was, like Pico thirty years earlier, disappointed of his hopes of promoting a public disputation, the ultimate outcome of his venture was destined to shake Germany and, in its repercussions, other European countries at their very foundations. Pico was denied any similar compensation.

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93. Luther's Primary Works, edited with theological and historical essays, by Henry Wace and C. A. Buchheim, p.414 (London, 1896).

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CHAPTER VPICO'S DEFENCE

Pico's oration De Hominis Dignitate had been intended to serve as an explanatory introduction and justification of the Nine Hundred Theses as well as an impressive discourse on the dignity of man. Hence it was not inappropriate that that section of it which referred specifically to the theses should have been incorporated by him in the opening portion of his Apologia. The main purpose of the latter, however, was the defence of those particular propositions which had been condemned as heretical. Pico's calumniators are distinguished by him into five groups. In the first place, he says, there were some who cavilled at the characteristic curiosity of his mind, warning him that those who wished to know more than is fitting ought to be exterminated from the Church of Christ, just as Adam was ejected from paradise because he wished by the knowledge of good and evil to make himself equal with God. Others expressed disapproval of a public debate such as Pico proposed, on the ground that it merely provided a platform for ostentation and self-display on his part.

There were some who charged him with rashness because, though a youth not yet twenty-four years of age,

he did not hesitate to promote a disputation concerning the highest points of philosophy, the sublime mysteries of Christian theology, and even unknown systems, and that too in the world's most famous city and amongst the most august men of learning. Others objected not so much to his issuing this challenge in Rome, nor to the fewness of his years, as to his having undertaken to debate in public no less than nine hundred propositions - a sign, in their estimation, of overweening ambition, besides being something quite beyond his powers. Others, again, bluntly announced that Pico was a magician, an impious individual, and, indeed, a new heresiarch in the Christian Church.

Pico tells us that he was in two minds as to whether he ought to demolish these objections or simply to let them pass in silence. The latter course was more congenial to him because of his horror of contention and the predilection of his studious nature for a tranquil existence. He considered it an abuse of a noble art for writing to be taken up with wrangling and altercation by which, in any case, injury and contumely inevitably recoil upon one's own head, no less than they are inflicted on others. A further incentive to ignore the calumnies and insults of unworthy critics was his contentment with the judgment of the supreme pontiff and his senate, "whose kindness and most benevolent attitude to me", he says, "I neither can nor ought to

forget". The expression of such a sentiment, however, can scarcely be assessed as anything other than the language of diplomacy, since it was the condemnation of his theses by the papal commission that, more than anything else, called forth his Apologia.

It was, he explains, precisely the charge of heresy that he found himself unable to pass over, lest by his silence he should seem to admit the justice of so serious an accusation. He supported himself with the authority of Jerome who, while urging that, in accordance with Christ's example, the greatest injustices should be patiently endured, had asserted that no one should be patient when the suspicion of heresy rests upon him.<sup>94</sup>

"And so", says Pico, "if there happen to be any who would like me to be silent, let them know that their controversy is not with me but with Jerome, who does not wish me to be silent; and who is able to disregard Jerome without shame? Therefore, with him persuading me, nay even compelling me, I have undertaken to write a brief apologia, not with the intention of damaging or incriminating

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<sup>94</sup>. Jerome: Contra Ioannem Hierosolymitanum, sec.2. "Nolo in suspicione haereseos quemquam esse patientem; ne apud eos qui ignorant innocentiam eius, dissimulatio conscientia iudicetur, si taceat". Migne: Patr.Lat., Tom.XXIII, 357.

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anyone, but primarily that I may excuse myself of the crime of impiety with which I am hurtfully charged".<sup>95</sup>

Pico describes his Apologia as brief: it was brief no doubt in intention, but scarcely so in execution, for it extends to some fifty thousand words - but then this adjective was used by him shortly after the commencement of the work, and we may take it that he did not foresee its expansion to such a length. The Apologia affords notable evidence of Pico's remarkable powers of concentration, as also of his vigour of mind and memory, for it was completed, as he himself tells us, within the short space of twenty nights, "properanti stylo".<sup>96</sup>

To have produced a work of such substance and elaboration in less than three weeks must in itself be accounted an unusual achievement and a testimony to the state of his intellectual equipment and preparedness for the great debate which he had proposed. "We know", says Randolph Hughes, writing of the remarkable men of this age, "that

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95. Opera Pici, p.115.

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96. Ibid., p.236. "Hoc ipsum, qualecunque est, opus uiginti est noctibus elucubratum". This is confirmed by his nephew in the Vita.

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Pico della Mirandola, when he published his nine hundred theses, embracing all human knowledge, and offered to maintain them without preparation against all comers, was not merely indulging in extravagant folly; and that the great Poliziano, when he said of Pico that 'Nature seemed to have showered all her gifts on this man, or hero', was not simply speaking in the over-amiable terms of a friend".<sup>97</sup>

There is a commendable note of moderation in the terms with which Pico solicits a hearing for his Apologia. "I request my detractors", he writes, "to suffer this in that spirit in which I have all along suffered their hostile injustice - let them suffer it, I say, from me who am a Christian born of Christian parents, who bear the badge of Christ in my forehead,<sup>98</sup> and who, as one who contends for and rejoices in the faith of Christ, affirm, as though with Paul, while they listen with unbiassed mind: I am not a magician,<sup>99</sup> nor a Jew,<sup>100</sup> nor an

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97. Randolph Hughes: Lucretia Borgia, p.92 (London, 1942).

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98. A reference to the sign of the cross received on the forehead at baptism.

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99. Referring to his "magical" propositions.

100. Referring to his cabalistic propositions.

Ishmaelite,<sup>101</sup> nor a heretic; but I worship Jesus, and I carry the cross of Jesus in my body, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.<sup>102</sup> Finally, since I neither arrogate to myself nor derogate from them the illustrious attributes of sanctity and wisdom and such like, I request this one thing for myself, in the defence of which I would even go so far as to shed my life-blood, namely, that I may be able to call myself a Christian". He goes on to state that the principal aim of the Apologia is to demonstrate that it is not he who has deviated from the orthodox and catholic path, but those who have branded him as a heretic.<sup>103</sup>

Before offering a vindication of those theses which had been pronounced heretical, however, Pico turns his attention to those other censures which, as we have seen, had been passed on the grand project that had brought him to Rome. The adroitness with which he counters these thrusts is of sufficient interest to detain us for a while. To those who disapproved of his cultivation of philosophy

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101. Referring to his propositions derived from the Arabian philosophers.

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102. A reminiscence of Galatians vi. 14,17.

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103. Opera Pici, p.115. "Principale propositum est hoc, ut ostendamus ab orthodoxo et catholico tramite non me sed illos deuiare, qui me haereticum calumniantur".

he tersely replies: "If it is base to devote oneself to letters and to cultivate the good arts and intellectual studies, I prefer to acknowledge guilt rather than to disavow it". To those who deplored the type of public disputation proposed by him he retorts: "This crime, if crime it is, I commit in common with great men, indeed with the most highly honoured philosophers, not only of our age but of almost all ages, who were quite assured that in their pursuit of the knowledge of truth nothing was more important for them than that they should frequently be engaged in the exercise of disputation". Just as the powers of the body are increased by gymnastic exercise, so in this literary wrestling-ring, as it were ("in hac quasi literaria palaestra"), the powers of the mind emerge far stronger and more productive.

To those who complained that by age, ability, and learning he was unequal to so great a task he rejoins modestly: "This is indeed a difficult matter on which to defend myself, since, if I say that I am equal to this task, then I appear to lay myself open to the charge of immodesty and of entertaining too high an opinion of myself; whereas if I admit that I am unequal to the task, then I appear to be rash and ill-advised". Thus Pico found himself in difficulties whichever way he answered. "I might, of course, produce that saying from the book

of Job that the Spirit is in everybody",<sup>104</sup> he continues; "and perhaps with Timothy I might heed the Apostle's advice, 'Let no man despise thy youth'.<sup>105</sup> But from my conscience I shall be honest and admit that there is nothing great or remarkable about me, neither do I assume to myself the reputation of being learned, though I do not deny that I am studious and a devotee of the good arts". Pico assigns as the reason for putting his shoulders to so heavy a burden the knowledge that it is a peculiar characteristic of battles of an intellectual nature that both winner and loser benefit from them; and so even the weakest individual ought to be bold enough to enter these lists, since in his form of warfare he who succumbs receives advantage, not injury, from his conqueror, and returns home more learned and better equipped for future contests.

With the cavil of those who protested against the great number of his theses Pico had little difficulty in dealing. He justly remonstrated that the burden of the propositions was his, not theirs, and that it was unbecoming

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104. Probably an allusion to Job xxxii.8: "There is a spirit in man, and the breath of the Almighty giveth them understanding".

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105. 1 Timothy iv.12.

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and excessively peevish of them to wish to set a limit to the industry of another. Would they have praised him for proposing ten questions for disputation? Why not all the more so for proposing nine hundred? What kind of reasoning is it to judge ten propositions laudable, but nine hundred culpable? The greater and more severe the task a man sets himself, the more does he merit the commendation of others, and failure to fulfil a grand project, even if it be due to inadequacy or immaturity, deserves pardon rather than censure. And here he aptly adduces the dictum of the Roman poet Propertius: "Though strength be deficient, boldness will be praise indeed: in great ventures it is sufficient to have desired".<sup>106</sup>

The multiplicity of his propositions, Pico contends, does not constitute evidence of impudence and self-inflation on his part; for it was under necessity that he propounded so many, and a consideration of his philosophical method would lead his detractors, even against their will, to admit this necessity. A man may be an adherent of one school of philosophy, say that of Thomas, or of Scotus, in which case it will require the

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106. Propertius: Eleg., II, viii, 9f.

" . . . si deficient uires, audaci<sup>a</sup> certe laus erit: in magnis et uoluisse sat est".

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discussion of only a few propositions in order to give proof of his learning. "But I have disciplined myself in such a manner", says Pico, "that, being bound to no man's teaching, I range through all the masters of philosophy, I examine all books, and I am acquainted with all schools".<sup>107</sup> Loyalty to this method could not possibly be served by putting forward a small number of theses, if one were to avoid both being guilty of serious omissions and also the appearance of being ruled by personal preference.

In following this comprehensive method of philosophizing Pico claims to be in an excellent succession, since it was the custom of the ancients to read every book and commentary they could lay their hands on; and of no one was this more true than of Aristotle, whom Plato for this reason called the "reader" (ἀναγνώστης). The ensuing passage illustrates admirably the universal scope of Pico's intellectual perspective and stamps the young nobleman as already a scholar of dignity and stature. "He has a narrow mind", he avers, "who confines himself to

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107. "At ego ita me institui, ut in nullius uerba iuratus, me per omnes philosophiae magistros funderem, omnes schedas excuterem, omnes familias agnoscerem".

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one porch or academy, and he who has not thoroughly acquainted himself with all previous writers is in no position to select from them all that is really characteristic. Besides, there is in each single school something distinctive which it does not share in common with the rest. For example, if I may begin with our own people,<sup>108</sup> to whom philosophy came last of all: in John Scotus there is something animated and critical, in Thomas something solid and equable, in Francis something sharp and acute, in Albert something pristine, ample, and grand, and in Henry, as it seems to me, something always sublime and venerable. Amongst the Arabs, there is in Averroes something firm and constant, in Avempace and in Alfarabius something grave and meditative, in Avicenna something divine and Platonic. Amongst the Greeks, philosophy is on the whole distinguished for its brilliance and purity: in Simplicius rich and copious, in Themistius elegant and compendious, in Alexander consistent and learned, in Theophrastus gravely elaborate, in Ammonius lucid and graceful. And if you turn to the Platonic authors - to examine just a few: in Porphyry you will delight in the abundance of themes and in the many-sided religion; in

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108. I.e. the Latin writers.

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Jamblichus you will venerate a more esoteric philosophy and the mysteries of the barbarians; while in Plotinus it is not any isolated aspect that you will admire, since he shows himself to be admirable in all respects; indeed, the toiling Platonists scarcely understand him as with learned obliquity of language he speaks divinely of divine things and far above men of human things. I pass over the more recent Platonists - Proclus, exuberant with Asiatic fecundity, and Hermias, Damascius, and Olympiodorus, and numerous others who followed him, in all of whom τὸ Θεῖον, that is, "the divine", the characteristic symbol of the Platonists, is always in evidence".

"What would be the sense", asks Pico, "in treating of the philosophy of the Latins alone - of Albert, Thomas, Scotus, Aegidius, Francis, and Henry - while passing over the Greek and Arab philosophers, since all wisdom has flowed from the barbarians to the Greeks, and from the Greeks to us?" Again, he demands: "What would be the benefit of having consulted with the Peripatetics concerning the study of natural science, unless also the Academy of the Platonists were summoned, especially as their teaching respecting divine things has always been regarded as the most sacred of all philosophies, as Augustine testifies,<sup>109</sup>

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109. Augustine: Civ. Dei, VIII, 4-9.

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and has now for the first time after many centuries, I believe, - I say it without boasting - been brought forward by me for critical discussion?" This claim of Pico's has reference to the "seventeen paradoxical conclusions following his own opinion, reconciling the sayings in the first place of Aristotle and Plato, and then of other doctors, who seem to differ very greatly from each other", which introduce the latter portion of the theses - five hundred propositions secundum opinionem propriam. The first of these propositions sums up Pico's position relative to Plato and Aristotle: "There is no question, natural or divine, in which Aristotle and Plato do not agree in meaning and matter, although in words they may seem to disagree".<sup>110</sup> This postulate of the harmony of Plato and Aristotle continued to occupy a prominent place in Pico's thinking, as will be seen when we come on to consider his treatise De Ente et Uno.

With reference to his contribution of five hundred propositions "following his own opinion", Pico comments as follows: "What is the good of having treated of the

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110. Opera Pici, p. 83. "Nullum est quaesitum naturale aut diuinum in quo Aristoteles et Plato sensu et re non conueniant, quamuis uerbis dissentire uideantur".

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opinions of others, however many they may be, if - like coming to a symposium of learned men without oneself bringing a contribution - I should contribute nothing which is my own, born and elaborated from my own intellect? It is indeed illiberal, as Seneca says,<sup>111</sup> to have knowledge solely from other men's commentaries and, as though the discoveries of greater men blocked the road of our own industry, as though the force of nature were effete within us, to bring nothing forth from oneself which, if it does not demonstrate the truth, at least indicates it, even though it be from afar. The colonist hates sterility in his land, and the husband in his wife; so much the more does the divine intellect hate an unproductive mind with which it is intertwined and associated, as in consequence a far nobler offspring is denied to it. Therefore I have not been content to have added, besides the common doctrines, many things from the pristine theology of Mercury Trismegistus, many things from the teachings of the Chaldeans and of Pythagoras, and many things from the esoteric mysteries of the Hebrews; but I have also propounded for disputation a great number of things discovered and conceived by myself concerning matters natural and divine".<sup>112</sup>

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111. Seneca: Epist. xxxiii,8.

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112. Opera Pici, p.119 (Apol.) = p.326 (De Hom.Dig.).

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The evident sincerity and high-mindedness of Pico's intellectual attitude together with his undoubted ability show him to be representative of the Renaissance spirit at its finest level, nor did his qualities ever fail to evoke the sympathy and admiration of those who were his true friends and who, as well, have been attested by the verdict of succeeding generations to have been the real intellectual aristocracy of his day. Those whose shrivelled humanity induced them to impugn his motives and to vilify his good name have long since passed into merited oblivion.

All Pico's writings of this period - Commento, De Hominis Dignitate, Nine Hundred Theses, and Apologia, as well as his letters - proclaim that he was, even though so young in years, a veritable embodiment of the spirit of the Italian Renaissance: the unique dignity of man, the intellectual creature, filled him with wonderment and stirred within him noble ambitions for the expression of his own innate potentialities. His insatiable thirst for knowledge was not to be assuaged by a draft from any one source: he wished to drink, as deeply as possible, at every spring of the human intellect. The whole range of learning and philosophy must become his, and it was loyalty to his own intellectual principles that impelled him to treat de omni re scibili; for him, anything less would have been quite unworthy. At the same time his mettlesome

sallies into the literary field were characterized by a sense of independence and adventure: to have been a mere interpreter or popularizer of the systems of other great minds of the past would have been far from satisfying to him; he himself wished to make his own distinctive contribution to the world's thought.

The avowedly universal scope of the Nine Hundred Theses was not, then, the expression of a vain exhibitionism - for all that Pico cherished confident hopes of achieving the highest fame thereby -, but a manifestation rather of the genuinely universal range of his mind and of his panting thirst for knowledge. Yet it was still more than that, for Pico wished not merely by intellectual appropriation to possess as his own all the world's philosophies, but to uncover and demonstrate the essential harmony which, as he believed, bound them all together. Of the Nine Hundred Theses, the first four hundred were offered as following the opinions of others, namely, the Latin writers - Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Francis of Mayrone, <sup>John</sup> ~~Duns~~ Scotus, Henry of Ghent, and Aegidius Romanus; the Arabian philosophers - Averroes, Avicenna, Alpharabius, Isaac of Nineveh, Avenzoar, Moses Maimonides, Mahomet of Toledo, and Avempace; the Peripatetics - Theophrastus, Ammonius, Simplicius, Alexander of Aphrodisias, and Themistius; the Platonists - Plotinus,

Adelandus the Arab, Porphyry, Jamblichus, and Proclus; and, in addition, Pythagoras, the Chaldean theologians, Mercury Trismegistus, and the cabalistic authors. The remaining five hundred, offered as his own original propositions, were (to quote from the heading which introduces this section) "divided by a tenfold division into physical, theological, Platonic, mathematical, those that assert paradoxes, those that reconcile paradoxes, Chaldean, Orphic, magical, and cabalistic".

He blandly promises to demonstrate in debate that those passages where Plato and Aristotle, or Thomas and Scotus, or Averroes and Avicenna, apparently express sentiments which are strongly opposed, may none the less be reconciled with each other in meaning and matter (sensu et re), no matter how greatly the actual words may seem to be at variance. Regarding Plato and Aristotle, Pico writes: "In the first<sup>113</sup> I have propounded the accord between Plato and Aristotle - something which has been believed hitherto by many, but satisfactorily

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113. Sc. of the concluding five hundred theses, viz:

"Nullum est quaesitum aut naturale aut diuinum in quo Aristoteles et Plato sensu et re non conueniant, quamuis uerbis dissentire uideantur".

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demonstrated by none. Amongst the Latin authors, Boethius promised that he would do this, but he seems never to have done what he always wished to do.<sup>114</sup> Amongst the Greek authors, Simplicius expressed a similar intention: would that he had been as good as his promise!<sup>115</sup> Augustine also, in his Contra Academicos, writes that there were not lacking many who attempted to demonstrate by the most subtle arguments this same thing, namely, that the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle is identical.<sup>116</sup> Again, John the Grammarian, in affirming that Plato and Aristotle are at variance with each other only in the minds of those who do not understand their sayings,<sup>117</sup> has none the less left this for those who come after to prove". Pico might also with advantage have summoned Cicero as a witness in support of his case, for in his Academica the Roman sage very plainly affirms the accord between the Academics and the Peripatetics,

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114. Boethius: De Interpretatione, ii, 3.

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115. Simplicius: Phys., 404, 16.

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116. Augustine: Con. Acad., iii, 19.

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117. I.e. John Philoponus - Reference not traced.

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"who agreed in doctrine though they differed in name".<sup>118</sup>

Pico's claim to be a pioneer in the enterprise of reconciling the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle must be regarded as somewhat extravagant, for there had been a number of attempts at this during the recent as well as the more distant past. Some years before the publication of his Nine Hundred Theses the great scholar Bessarion had endeavoured to demonstrate the accord between Plato and Aristotle in his book In Calumniatorem Platonis. Indeed, during the half-century before Pico's birth a bitter and unedifying conflict had been waged between the champions of Plato on the one hand and those of Aristotle on the other; and it was left to Bessarion to instil a little sanity into this scene of exasperation. The trouble started with Gemistos Pletho, who was a rabid Platonist. Soon after the Council of Florence he published a fierce attack against Aristotle which had the effect of inciting George Scholarius to rally to the Stagyrte's defence. Bessarion was Gemistos Pletho's most distinguished pupil, and the respect in which he held

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118. Cicero: Acad., i. 17 f. " . . . Academicorum et Peripateticorum, qui rebus congruentes nominibus differebant . . . nihil enim inter Peripateticos et illam ueterem Academiam differebat".

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his teacher is apparent from a letter sent by him to Pletho's sons after the aged philosopher's death (c. 1452). "I rejoice", he writes, "to have lived with such a man. Since Plato (and I also make an exception for Aristotle) Greece has never produced anyone so wise. If it is possible for anyone to believe in the ideas of Pythagoras and Plato regarding the endless journeyings and migrations of souls, I would willingly add that the soul of Plato, compelled by immutable constraints of destiny to return to this earth, borrowed the body of Gemistos and chose to live in him".

Bessarion was, however, compared with his master, remarkably balanced in his philosophical outlook, and he was certainly not the bigoted Platonist that Pletho was. In fact, from the Council of Florence onwards he joined issue with his teacher over the question of the worth of Aristotle. Bessarion knew his Aristotle at first hand, as it were, which was uncommon at that time. He had rendered a notable service to his age by translating the Metaphysics and thus helping to restore the genuine Aristotle. It is true that the Metaphysics had been studied at the University of Paris since the end of the twelfth century, but the versions that had been handed down were corrupt and adulterated owing to the culpable manner in which earlier Alexandrian, Arab, and Jewish commentators had tampered with the text.

Aristotle, it will be remembered, had had somewhat of a chequered career in the Church of the Middle Ages. Early in the thirteenth century his works were condemned by papal edict as antagonistic to the faith, and were commanded to be burnt, a solemn prohibition being placed upon the reading or copying of these books. As for those who had already read them, they were enjoined to forget what they had read! Aristotle, however, was not to be so easily suppressed, and so the Church, by an act of theological contortionism, turned to her own advantage the threat which he had offered to her authority by adopting or "baptizing" him as an orthodox Christian. The task of reconciling the Aristotelian system with Christian theology was shouldered, in the main, by two outstanding scholars, Albert the Great and his pupil Thomas Aquinas. "The desirability of attempting this reconciliation was clear", says Father Copleston, "since to reject the Aristotelian system would mean rejecting the most powerful and comprehensive intellectual synthesis known to the mediaeval world".<sup>119</sup> Thus it became possible for the Greek philosopher to take an honoured seat among the Fathers of the Church.

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119. F. Copleston: History of Philosophy, Vol. II, p.423 (London, 1950).

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The balance of Bessarion's outlook is emphasized by the fact that, while he had felt constrained to take up the cudgels on Aristotle's behalf against Gemistos Pletho, he later entered the lists as Plato's champion against George of Trebizond.<sup>120</sup> The latter was a literary charlatan who rushed into the intellectual battle as a frenzied Aristotelian. His bucolic assault upon Plato and his indiscriminating adulation of Aristotle brought him up against the solid weight of Bessarion's scholarship. Bessarion knew his Greek philosophers too well, however, to decry the one at the expense of the other. The two philosophers, he maintained, each presented a different aspect of the truth and their doctrines were not discrepant. "George", he wrote in his reply entitled In Calumnistorem Platonis, "dares to prefer Aristotle to Plato, while condemning the latter in a manner that is laughable. For myself, so far am I from condemning Aristotle, that I shall make every effort to prove that these philosophers are always in agreement".

George's attack on Plato was, presumably, intended as a counterblast to Pletho's attack on Aristotle, for it was published under precisely the same title as that of

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120. Pearl Kibre erroneously says it was against Theodore Gaza: op. cit., p.26.

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Pletho, namely, Comparatio Platonis et Aristotelia, which was impudent enough in itself because it implied also a comparison of his own scholarship with that of Pletho. His war against Plato came to a head in a scurrilous attempt to impose upon the learned world a so-called translation of the Laws. This travesty of scholarship was brim-full of errors and afforded the clearest proof of the prejudice, ignorance, and dishonesty of the supposed translator. It was no difficult undertaking for a man of Bessarion's erudition to demonstrate that the composer of this disgraceful elucubration was both an incompetent and an impostor.

Bessarion switched again to the defence of Aristotle when Michael Apostolius published an ill-conceived opusculum in which he attacked Theodore Gaza, whose translation of certain of Aristotle's writings had evoked Bessarion's commendation. "It is with difficulty that I suffer your ignorant accusations against Theodore", the latter wrote to Michael; "but that you should have dared to treat with similar indignity Aristotle himself, our master in all knowledge, that you should have dared to call him ignorant, vicious, extravagant, graceless - this seems to me to reach the very peak of audacity and impertinence. It is with difficulty that I suffer Pletho - indeed, I do not suffer him altogether, great man though he is - when he levels the same accusations against

Aristotle: how, then, should I be able to suffer you, who have not yet delved deeply into a single one of these matters?" To a man of Bessarion's intellectual stature and discernment partisan controversy of this nature was not only despicable but definitely hurtful to the cause of sane scholarship.

In his clash with George of Trebizond he had written: "In answering these animadversions, I am afraid lest I should appear to have a better opinion of Plato than of Aristotle, and even seem to disapprove of Aristotle - something which is very far from my mind. I shall always speak of Aristotle with the greatest respect. Far from me be any deplorable and misguided thought of attempting to exalt Plato so that Aristotle may be discredited". To champion the one philosopher with the intention of demolishing the other was, in any case, a futile exercise, and Bessarion's common-sense approach to this matter which was engendering so much bitterness and misplaced fanaticism in academic circles was altogether commendable. He would doubtless have welcomed acquaintance with the fragment in which Aristotle expresses admiration for his master's teaching and affection and reverence for his person - "that unique man", he calls him, "whose name is not to come from the lips of the wicked; for theirs is not the right to praise him who first revealed clearly by word and by deed that he who

is virtuous is happy. Alas!" he adds, "not one of us can equal him".<sup>121</sup> Nor was Bessarion obsessed with the idea that either or both Plato and Aristotle were practically fully-fledged Christians. During his day, as well as in previous centuries, over-enthusiasm had led some to entertain this fancy of one or other of these philosophers. Bessarion justly affirmed that both Plato and Aristotle were pagans, though it was possible to find more in Plato than in Aristotle that is agreeable to the truth of the Christian religion. Even so he left no room for misunderstanding of his position. "I declare openly", he said, "that I am not wedded to the ideas of Plato to the point of constant approval and of daring to compare his doctrine to that of Christianity. I do not approve of his views regarding the pre-existence of the soul, the multiplicity of gods, the life of heaven and of the stars, nor regarding many other matters". Bessarion's position relative to the two philosophers is suitably summarized in his own words: "Colo et ueneror Aristotelem, amo Platonem".<sup>122</sup>

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121. Aristotle: Fragm. 623 (a free rendering of the Greek).

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122. For a detailed account of the controversy see Henry Vast: Le Cardinal Bessarion (1403-1472): Etude sur la Chrétienté et la Renaissance vers le milieu du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle (Paris, 1878), to whom I am indebted for the quotations from Bessarion given above.

Other men of that period who shared Bessarion's interest in the harmony of Plato and Aristotle were the Aristotelian scholar John Argyropoulos and the Platonist scholar Marsilio Ficino, who had studied under Argyropoulos in Florence, as had also other famous contemporaries such as Lorenzo the Magnificent, Angelo Poliziano, and Johann Reuchlin. Pico had thus in some measure been anticipated in this matter of reconciling Plato and Aristotle. But his intention was to go much further than Bessarion who had held that close union did not mean identity, but on the contrary permitted a degree of diversity, so that the one philosopher could be regarded as supplying what the other lacked. Pico's doctrine, however, was one of identity: in accordance with his belief in the unitary nature of all philosophy, his aim was to demonstrate that where the one appeared to contradict the other there existed none the less a complete agreement between them. This meant going to the opposite extreme to that of partisan fanaticism.

(410-485 A.D.), who studied under the Peripatetic scholar Olympiodorus at Alexandria and under the Neoplatonists Plutarch and Syrianus at Athens, was a thinker whose great dialectical ability is shown in his writings on Platonic and Aristotelian subjects, in which he also offered a synthesis of Greek philosophical thought.

This line was carried on by Boethius (480-524 A.D.), excepting that Boethius was reputedly a professing Christian, whereas the others we have mentioned were either indifferent or antagonistic to Christianity. He translated into Latin and commented on much of Aristotle as well as Porphyry's Isagoge, and also composed a number of original philosophical works, including the De Consolatione Philosophiae which has never ceased to be read with admiration. It was largely thanks to his labours that the knowledge of Aristotle's writings, incomplete though it was, became available to the scholars and thinkers of the early Middle Ages. We have already seen how Pico referred to the intention of Boethius to demonstrate that between Plato and Aristotle there exists a philosophical accord.

Another line of communication was that of the Moslem philosophers. In the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries translations of certain of Aristotle's works and also of Porphyry's Isagoge were made into Syriac and Persian, and

subsequently the Syriac versions were rendered into Arabic. At Baghdad during the ninth century translations not only of Aristotle but also of some of the works of Plato were undertaken. Included in these translations were writings of Plotinus and Proclus which were mistakenly attributed to the two Greek masters. Thus it came about that through the medium of the Arabian philosophers of the tenth to the twelfth centuries - notably Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes - a sort of Neoplatonic Aristotelianism was developed and ultimately passed on to the Western world. Pico, as his works clearly show, was an eager student of these Arab thinkers; but they had been exerting a not inconsiderable influence on Italian thought well before his day: Dante, for instance, who was born almost two centuries before Pico, gives strong evidence of acquaintance with their doctrines. During these two centuries, indeed, Averroism with its strange complex of ideas gained a remarkably firm footing in learned circles. Averroes himself was a Spanish Mohammedan, and not very long after his death his works were translated into Latin and won for him adherents in the European universities, notably at Paris where for so many years the Averroistic controversy raged, and at Padua where it is likely that Pico first encountered his doctrines.

It should be remembered too that even Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274 A.D.), who is not without reason regarded as

the chief "christianizer" of Aristotelianism, was by no means uninfluenced by Platonic and Neoplatonic modes of thought, as is frequently apparent in his works; but, as was the case with his teacher Albert the Great, the Aristotelian ingredient was dominant in the constituency. Of course, with the founding by Cosimo de' Medici in the fifteenth century of the Platonic Academy in Florence, the system of Plato was to come right to the fore again after having suffered a partial eclipse and being discernible hitherto in the main in its somewhat shadowy Neoplatonic guise.

Pico's interest in the reconciliation of all philosophy, and in particular of Plato and Aristotle, was not a passing phase which disappointment at the failure of his project for a grand debate was allowed to smother. His personal and intellectual qualities were such as to rise superior to temporary frustrations. On the 20th of March, 1490, some three years after the fiasco at Rome, he writes from Florence to Baptiste Mantuano: "I am working on assiduously at my harmony of Plato and Aristotle. Every day I devote the whole morning to it".<sup>123</sup> It was a work at which he continued right up to the time of his death in

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123. Opera Pici, p.358. "Concordiam Platonis et Aristotelis assidue molior. Do illi quotidie iustum matutinum".

1494, and was intended to be one of his magna opera; but as such it was destined to remain an opus imperfectum, together with his work "against the enemies of the Church" and his expositions of Holy Scripture. On March 23, 1495, a few months after his death, Ficino wrote to Germano de Ganai: "Every day he used to work at three things - the harmony of Plato and Aristotle, the exegesis of Holy Scripture, and the refutation of the astrologers".<sup>124</sup>

In 1491, however, Pico published a treatise which was devoted to a particular aspect of the reconciliation of Plato and Aristotle, namely, his De Ente et Uno. Rigg speaks of this essay as "a chapter, and by no means an unimportant chapter, in the long dialectic on the nature of universals and their relation to particulars, which formed the staple of mediaeval thought".<sup>125</sup> In this attempt to provide an answer to the problem of the unity and absoluteness of God on the one hand and the multiform and interdependent character of the created order on the other, the harmonizing of Plato and Aristotle

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124. Ibid., p.406. "Moliebatur quotidie tria, concordiam Aristotelis cum Platone, enarrationes in eloquia sacra, confutationes astrologorum".

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125. In his Introduction to More's translation of the Vita, ut supra, p.xx.

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provides only a starting-point. Having demonstrated, at least to his own satisfaction, the accord between the two philosophers on this subject, Pico proceeds to develop his theme with no little virtuosity in a distinctively Neoplatonic manner.

The immediate occasion of the writing of this essay is indicated in the introductory dedication of the work to his friend Poliziano. "Recently", says Pico, "you told me of a conversation about ens and unum which you had with Lorenzo de'Medici when, himself favouring the doctrines of the Platonists, he argued with you against Aristotle whose Ethics have this year been the subject of your public lectures - for he is a man of such powerful and versatile talents that he seems to be equal to everything he undertakes. In particular, I admire the way in which, although ceaselessly occupied with affairs of state, he is yet always discussing or meditating on some literary subject. And because those who think that Aristotle differs from Plato differ from me, for I hold that the two philosophers are in accord with each other, you asked me how Aristotle might be vindicated on this question and reconciled with Plato his master. I told you then what occurred to me at the moment, confirming the answers which you offered Lorenzo during your discussion with him, rather than providing you with

anything new. But this did not satisfy you; for you demanded that, although it is my intention to write on these matters more extensively in the Platonis Aristotelisque Concordia which I am preparing, I should none the less bring together briefly for you in a small commentary (commentariolo) those arguments which I then proposed to you in your presence, when also, as it happened, Domenico Benivieni was present, a person beloved of us both for his own sake as well as for his learning and integrity. But what can I refuse you, whom I may almost call my inseparable companion, especially in a matter of a literary nature?"<sup>126</sup>

Poliziano acknowledged his gratification at this dedication in the following elegant terms: "I have always had a burning desire, too presumptuously, it may be, but nevertheless I have always had this burning desire for perpetual fame and for glory such as cannot be expected from anything that I shall leave behind. Seeing, however, that the things which I have written have scarcely given promise that I shall be remembered even by name, you, Pico, have come forward to supply what was beyond my

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126. Opera Pici, p.241.

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powers by dedicating to me your Commentary De Uno et Ente<sup>127</sup> (for this is the title you have given it) in which you trace back to one source the streams that flow down through the Lyceum and the Academy, and combine our own (sc. Christian) theology with a single rather than a twofold philosophy. What need have I, then, of the herb of Glaucus now that I am destined to live on not only through you but, indeed, with you? Hereafter posterity shall make mention that there once existed a certain Poliziano whom Pico, the glory of all learning, esteemed so highly that he did not hesitate to inscribe to him a most noble book respecting the loftiest matters. And so I return thanks to you for my immortality".<sup>128</sup>

Such effusiveness, though typical of the exaggerated and frequently insincere language of that age, should not in this instance be judged too harshly, for Poliziano's admiration and affection for Pico were most genuinely and deeply felt.

Pico commences his treatise by remarking that Aristotle speaks in many places of unum and ens as

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127. Sic. Pico actually called it De Ente et Uno.

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128. Opera Pici, p.405.

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coterminous,<sup>129</sup> whereas the Platonic philosophy is supposed to teach that unum is prior and superior to ens and that the two terms are not interchangeable. But an examination of the passages where Plato deals with the question of ens and unum, in particular the Parmenides and the Sophist, fails, says Pico, to reveal that he gave unum a position above ens, as the Academists contend he did. In any case, the Parmenides ought not, he affirms, to be reckoned amongst Plato's dogmatic works, for it is only a sort of exercise in dialectic ("dialectica quaedam exercitatio") which is wrested by the arbitrary interpretations of those who wish to assign to the Parmenides a sense other than Plato intended.<sup>130</sup>

Pico, however, prefers to leave aside the offerings of the various interpreters of Plato and to examine the dialogue itself systematically in order to arrive at its meaning. The disputation centres around the question whether all things are one or many ("unumne sint omnia an sint multa quae sunt"). Nowhere in this dialogue, he says, is anything definitely affirmed by Plato, but everywhere

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129. Cf. Aristotle: Metaphys. IV,ii,1003<sup>e</sup> ff.; XI,iii,1060<sup>b</sup> ff.

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130. Cf. Plato: Parmen. 127a-135d.

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the question is posed: what follows if this is so and what if it is not so? Accordingly, in inquiring what would follow if all things were one, Plato infers that unum would not be equal with ens.<sup>131</sup> But it will be found that in the Sophist Plato says that unum and ens are equal, rather than that unum is superior to ens.<sup>132</sup>

Ens was understood by Aristotle as signifying all that which is apart from nothing ("omne id quod est extra nihil"). Moreover, according to Simplicius,<sup>133</sup> in saying that unum is that which is ("unum esse id quod est"), the Pythagorean philosopher Parmenides understood this of God. "Thus", declares Pico, "if we believe Parmenides and his defenders, who are also Platonists, unum cannot be above ens, unless it is above God; but so far is Parmenides from denying that God is ens, that it is to God alone that he allows the proper appellation of ens".

Even Dionysius the Areopagite", continues Pico, whom

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131. Ibid. 137c-142c; cf. Plotinus: Enn. V, i, 8.

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132. Plato: Soph. 237d ff.

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133. Simplicius: Phys. I, 147.

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those who argue against me claim as a supporter of their doctrine, will not deny that it was truly said by God to Moses, Ego sum qui sum, which in Greek reads  $\epsilon\gamma\omega$   
 $\epsilon\iota\mu\iota \ \acute{\omicron} \ \acute{\omega}\nu$  , or, in other words, Ego sum ens".<sup>134</sup>

Yet these same persons admit that nothing or non ens is the opposite of ens, just as multitude is the opposite of unum; therefore, reasons Pico, they must admit that God is either nothing - which is unthinkable - or that He is ens. If, then, ens excludes only nothing from itself, beyond doubt all things are necessarily embraced by it; and so it follows that unum cannot embrace more things than ens. "If, therefore", he concludes, "ens does not embrace fewer things than unum, as my opponents wish, ens and unum are equal".

Yet, despite these considerations, Pico now goes on to explain that there is another manner of understanding ens in accordance with which it is possible to assert that there is something to which an eminence above ens may be assigned ("esse aliquid quod <sup>a</sup>supr~~s~~ entis eminentiam collocetur"). He approaches the problem in terms of the abstract and the concrete. Some appellations, he says, are concrete and some abstract. Examples of the former

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134. Pseudo-Dionysius: De Nom. Div. I,6 (Migne: Patr. Graec. III, 596 A-B).

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because it is black, but because the reason for its not being black is not merely that it is white, which is the same as saying that it has whiteness, but rather because it itself is whiteness".

This is an important stage in Pico's argument as he prepares the way for a consideration of the divine nature as contrasted with the qualities of the created order. The direction of his thought in this respect had already been indicated in one of the Nine Hundred Theses and its corollary, as follows: "Just as substantial forms in the second world exist by the mode of accidents, so accidental forms in the first world exist by the mode of substances. Corollary: Just as in the first world there is not a white quality, but whiteness, so in the second world there is not fire, but a fiery quality".<sup>135</sup> Abstract and concrete, substance and accident, the universal and the particular, the one and the many, are, of course,

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135. Opera Pici, p.90. No.23 of conclusiones paradoxae LXXI secundum opinionem propriam, nou<sup>a</sup> in philosophia dogmata inducentes. "Sicut formae substantiales in secundo mundo sunt per modum accidentium, it<sup>a</sup> formae accidentales sunt in primo mundo per modum substantiarum. Corollarium: Sicut in primo mundo non est album, sed albedo, ita in secundo mundo non est ignis, sed igneum".

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familiar variations of a recurring theme in medieval philosophy; and by the first and second worlds Pico intends the distinction between the divine and the human, or the celestial and terrestrial, worlds. In the development of his argument he now proposes to place ens in the category of the concrete.

Ens, he maintains, has the character of a concrete term which may be defined as id quod est, and its corresponding abstract is found in the term esse, so that ens may be described as that which participates of esse, just as what is luminous participates of light. Two things, then, must be denied of ens: firstly, that what does not exist or is nothing is ens; and, secondly, that that which exists to such a degree that it itself is esse, namely, that which exists a se and ex se, and by participation of which all things exist, is ens. "But such is God", he affirms, "who is the plenitude of all esse, who alone exists a se, and by whom alone, without any intermediation, all things have advanced to existence" ("Tale autem est Deus qui est totius plenitudo, qui solus a se est et a quo solo, nullo intercedente medio, omnia ad esse processerunt"). Important though this stage is in Pico's argument, he would have been more consistent with his own definitions had he said that it was by God alone that all things have advanced "to the participation of esse", that is, have become entities, instead of just

"to esse". But his meaning is clear enough.

Plato's doctrine differed from this in so far as he had held that all created things come into being through the intermediary operation of junior or lesser gods, to whom the great Artificer of the universe had entrusted the task of reducing to order the chaos of the material world.<sup>136</sup> Some such postulate was necessary for his system if the supreme spiritual absolute was to be kept from the indignity of contact with matter, which was regarded as an evil principle of this inferior world. Plato's junior gods correspond to his "forms" or "ideas": Aristotle explains that they "are the cause of the essence of all other things, and the One is the cause of the essence of the forms".<sup>137</sup> In the early centuries of the Christian era this dualism of God and matter became a prominent ingredient of the Gnostic farrago with its elaborate device of intermediary emanations. Pico avoids it, however, and, in asserting that it is through God alone, without any mediation, that all things have come into being, he is propounding the orthodox Christian belief. But it will soon be apparent

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136. Plato: Tim. 42d-e; 69c.

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137. Aristotle: Metaphys. 988.

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that in other respects his conception of the nature and cognoscibility of God has its roots firmly grounded in the Platonic (or, more accurately, Pythagorean) dialectic.

Pico's argument, then, leads him to affirm that God is not ens, but above ens; and since the appellation of the One has been given to God, it must be admitted that unum is superior to ens ("Hac igitur ratione uere dicemus Deum non esse ens, sed super ens, et ente aliquid esse superius, hoc est Deum ipsum cui quoniam unius datur appellatio, consequens inde ut unum supra ens esse fateamur"). This is, in effect, an echo of Plato, who taught that the Good, or God, "is not essence, but is beyond essence, and surpasses it in dignity and power".<sup>138</sup>

In expounding what is meant by calling God unum, Pico cites two passages from Pseudo-Dionysius. According to the first of these, God is called unum because He is uniquely all things ("Unum enim dicitur Deus quia unice est omnia");<sup>139</sup> and according to the second, He is called unum because He is the principle of all things that exist, just as unity is the principle of all numbers ("unum dicitur quia ita principium omnium est quae sunt, sicut

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<sup>138</sup>. Plato: Republ. VI, 509b.

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<sup>139</sup>. Pseudo-Dionysius: Nom. Div. I,vii (Migne: P.G. III, 596c-597a).

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omnium numerorum principium unitas est").<sup>140</sup> And so, after all, Pico finds himself prepared to grant the Academists their demand that in the Parmenides Plato affirms that unum is superior to ens, provided it is understood that Plato is there treating of God, the prime principle of all things ("de primo rerum omnium principio ibi a Platone tractari").<sup>141</sup>

In saying this, of course, Pico has gone back on his previous contention that unum and ens are equal in Plato just as they are in Aristotle, and the fervour with which he maintained it seems to have been somewhat misplaced, for he is now defending the position which he previously assailed. Can it be that in attempting to demonstrate an essential harmony between Plato and Aristotle he is expending his ingenuity in vain? Pico, however, is not unaware that he has seemingly left his flank open, and he shows himself prepared to accept the new challenge by turning the battle in the opposite direction from that in which he has hitherto prosecuted it. Already he has endeavoured to prove that Plato no less than Aristotle teaches the identity of unum and ens; thence he has proceeded to explain how unum, when understood of God, is yet superior to ens, even in Plato; and now it remains for him to demonstrate that Aristotle no less than Plato teaches that there is a sense in which the inferiority of ens to unum may be maintained.

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140. Ibid. V,vi (Migne: P.G. III, 820c-821a).

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141. Cf. Plotinus: Enn. V,i,8.

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He thus sallies forth against an imaginary objector. "Someone", he writes, "will say that at any rate in this respect Aristotle will be at variance with Plato, since Aristotle never takes ens, as Plato does, in such a way that it is below unum and does not embrace God". To this he immediately retorts: "Those who speak thus have never read Aristotle, for he does just this very thing, and far more clearly than Plato". He refers the reader to the sixth book of the Metaphysics, in which Aristotle divides ens into ens per se, comprising the ten categories, and ens per accidens.<sup>142</sup> Reliable interpreters, says Pico, are quite definite that God cannot be understood under either of these divisions of ens, a distinction which among the Peripatetics is popularly called a distinction between substance and accident. This being so, it must be admitted that God is above ens, just as Thomas Aquinas teaches in the first book of his commentaries on the Theological Sentences.<sup>143</sup> Pico chides certain Platonists who boast, as though possessing a mystery unknown to Aristotle, "that there are two appellations proper to God, namely, the One and the

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142. Aristotle: Metaphys. 1026a ff.

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143. Thomas Aquinas: I Sent., d.19, q.4, a.1.

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Good, and thus that bonum and unum are before ens"; and he proceeds to overthrow their pride by showing that Aristotle, in book twelve of his *Metaphysics*, in fact attributed these very names "Good" and "One" to God, while at the same time adducing valid reasons for so doing and also citing in support of the doctrine of the divine unity the words of Homer: "Let there be one commander, one king" (*εἰς κοίρανος ἔστω, εἰς βασιλεύς*).<sup>144</sup> "Where, then, is Aristotle in error?" asks Pico. "Where is there discord between Plato and Aristotle? Where is Aristotle profane? Where does he hold sentiments respecting God which are less than honourably becoming?" And so Pico believes that he has successfully disclosed that the doctrine of Plato and Aristotle is one and the same; but others may judge his procedure to be somewhat less than conclusive. His own view really coincides with the more distinctively Platonic view that unum is superior to ens, rather than with the view that unum and ens are equivalent terms.

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<sup>144</sup>. Aristotle: *Metaphys.* 1075 ff.

Homer: *Iliad*, II, 204 f.

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CHAPTER VII

THE ASCENT TO DARKNESS

It is at this point<sup>145</sup> that Pico commences a more precise investigation of the nature of God, respecting whom, he says, "many things may be both truly affirmed and truly denied not merely by different authors, such as Platonists and Peripatetics, but often by the same author". According to him, God is all things ("Deus omnia est"), though, as will soon be plain, to conclude from this that Pico's outlook is pantheistic would be to misunderstand him, for, on the contrary, his view is one of thoroughgoing transcendentalism. It is in the most eminent and perfect manner that God is all things ("Deus omnia est et eminentissime atque perfectissime est omnia"). The perfections of all things are included in God in such a way that no trace of imperfection can be found in Him ("ita in se claudat omnium perfectiones ut quicquid ad imperfectionem spectat in rebus a se reiiciat").

Pico defines imperfection in a double sense: the first is lack of perfection in a thing in its own genus;

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145. Opera Pici, pp. 246 ff. Chapter five of the De Ente et Uno.

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the second is <sup>t</sup>limitation of a thing to its own genus, although perfect in that genus. The latter lacks simple perfection, "since it possesses the perfection of one genus only, and outside of it there are many other gener<sup>a</sup> adorned with their own perfections which are not embraced by it". Sensual cognition illustrates the former type of imperfection because it is cognition confined to the experience of external objects, and does not penetrate to the inmost nature of things, that is, to substance. Human cognition is imperfect inasmuch as it is hazy, uncertain, shifting, and laboured ("uaga, incerta, mobilis, laboriosa"); angelic cognition also, because it constantly seeks what it does not possess within itself, namely, the light of the truth, lacking which it lacks perfection.

As a further example, Pico asks us to consider life as it is in created organisms: it is not imperfect merely because it is life alone and not cognition (which would be the second type of imperfection), but because it is not pure life ("pura uita") but rather "a sort of vivification, derived from the coming of the soul into the body, always in flux, always adm<sup>x</sup>ised with death, deserving, in fact, to be called death rather than life. For", he adds, "lest perchance you should be ignorant of this, we begin to die at the moment when we first begin to live" ("uiuificatio quaedam ab anima in corpus deriuata, semper fluens,

semperadmixta mortis, magis denique mors uocanda quam uita.

Incipimus enim, si nescis, tunc mori cum primum incipimus uiuere"). Even the life of angels is imperfect, since it would completely fade away into nothing were it not perennially nourished by the life-giving ray of the divine light ("uiuificus radius diuinae lucis"). "Therefore", warns Pico, "when you make God cognoscent and living, take care first of all that the life and cognition which are attributed to Him are understood as being free from all these disabilities".

This precaution, however, is not sufficient, for there is still the second type of imperfection to take into consideration. One may imagine life that is absolutely perfect, total, and pure, having no admixture of mortality or impermanence; and, again, one may imagine cognition by which all things are simultaneously and absolutely perfectly known, so that he who possesses it has all truth within himself and is, in fact, truth itself. Yet "neither of these, although each is most perfect in its own genus and is such that it cannot exist outside of God, is worthy of God when taken in this manner and mutually distinguished; for God is infinite perfection of every kind, but not just for the reason that He comprehends in Himself all particular perfections which are infinite as such, for then neither would He be absolutely simple nor would those things which

are in Him be infinite, but there would be an infinite unum compounded of many things infinite in number but finite in perfection: but to speak or think thus of God is profanity".

Our conception of deity, then, must be such that the life ascribed to God is free both from any imperfection in itself and also from that imperfection which makes it life only, as distinct from cognition and all the other attributes which we assign to deity. Accordingly, God must be conceived as one, most perfect, infinite, and absolutely simple ("unum, perfectissimum, infinitum, simplicissimum"). Moreover, although life is a particular ens, and likewise wisdom and justice and all other qualities possessed by God, yet, if the idea of particularity and limitation is removed from these, what remains is "not this or that ens, but ens itself, ens in a simple sense, universal ens" ("non hoc aut illud ens erit, sed ipsum ens, sed simplicit<sup>e</sup>r ens, sed uniuersale ens").

Similarly, wisdom is a particular good, but it is a different good from that of justice. God, however, is not good in a particular sense, for He is "all good itself, good in a simple sense, the good which is the good of all good" ("omne bonum ipsum, bonum simplicit<sup>e</sup>r, bonum omnis boni bonum"). Again, just as life is a particular ens, so also it is a particular unum; and

similarly with wisdom. "Remove the particularity, and it is not this or that unum which remains, but unum itself and unum in a simple sense. . . . God, therefore, is ens itself, unum itself, the good itself, and the true itself" ("Abice particularitatem, remanet non hoc aut illud unum, sed ipsum unum et simplicit<sup>e</sup>r unum. . . . Deus ergo ipsum ens, ipsum unum, ipsum bonum similiter et ipsum uerum").

Our guide has now conducted us two stages on our journey towards God. In the first stage we discard the imperfection residing in things themselves, and in the second we dismiss the imperfection implicit in the particularity of things as limited to their own genus. This intellectual journey is described by Pico as an ascent to the darkness which God inhabits ("ad caliginem ascendentes quam Deus inhabitat"). Our journey, however, is but half done, for there remain two further stages to be achieved, "of which the one argues the deficiency of names and the other bespeaks the infirmity of our understanding". These terms, ens, uerum, unum, bonum, indicate something concrete, something as it were participated, and as such are inappropriate for application to God. And so we advance to the third stage and say that "God is above ens, above uerum, above unum, above bonum, since He is being itself, truth itself, unity itself, goodness itself" ("dicimus Deum super ens, super uerum, super unum, super bonum esse, quia scilicet ipsum esse est, ips<sup>a</sup> ueritas,

ipsa unitas, ipsa bonitas").

"But", says Pico, so far we are in the light, whereas God has appointed darkness as His hiding-place.<sup>146</sup> This being so, we have not yet arrived at God; for so long as we understand and comprehend what we say about God we are said to be moving in the light, and to the extent that our understanding is less than His infinite divinity, to that extent do we speak and conceive lesser things concerning God". We must, therefore climb to the fourth stage and enter into "the light of ignorance" ("ignorantiae lucem"). There, "blinded by the darkness of the divine splendour" ("diuini splendoris caligine exoculati"), we shall join the prophet in exclaiming, "I fainted in Thy courts, O Lord",<sup>147</sup> and then at last we shall affirm this one thing about God, "that He is unintelligibly<sup>148</sup> and ineffably above all that we can say or conceive most perfectly of Him". We shall, in fact, assign to God the position of supreme eminence "above even the unity, the goodness, and the truth which

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146. "Deus autem posuit tenebras latibulum suum": a quotation from the Vulgate version of Psalm xviii.11.

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147. "Defeci in atriis tuis, domine": an inaccurate reminiscence, it would seem, of Psalm lxxxiv.2, "deficit anima mea in atria Domini" (Vulgate).

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148. Reading inintelligibiliter for intelligibiliter, a correction proposed by Festugière and adopted by Garin.

we have conceived, and above being itself".

In one of his cabalistic conclusions<sup>149</sup> Pico had spoken of God's "separation from things, His complete self-seclusion, and His profound and solitary withdrawal into the remotest recess of His own divinity", so that He must be understood as "in His inmost being concealing Himself in the abyss of His own darkness" ("ipso penitissime in abyssu suarum tenebrarum se contegente"). This is of interest as illustrating the degree to which medieval Jewish mysticism had assimilated certain of the Greek metaphysical ideas, while at the same time retaining its own distinctive character. The Jewish mystics regarded Exodus xx.21 - "and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was" - as a proof-text of this doctrine of the divine self-retraction and incommunicability, and held also that the soul had need of an enveloping ethereal garment before it could in any sense approach the divine presence, as the following passage from the Zohar explains: "Were the soul not clothed in the resplendency of another (i.e. non-fleshly) garment, it would not be able to approach that

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149. Number 35 of Conclusiones Cabalisticæ numero LXXI (sic; actually there are seventy-two) secundum opinionem propriam, ex ipsis Hebraeorum sapientum fundamentis Christianam religionem maxime confirmantes.

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effulgence. The esoteric doctrine is that in the same way as the soul has to be clothed in a bodily garment in order to exist in this world, so is she given an ethereal supernal garment wherewith to exist in the other world, and to be enabled to gaze at the effulgence of life from that 'land of the living'. Hence it is that Moses was not able to draw near to the place of God and to fix his gaze on what was to be seen there until he was first enveloped in another garment, as we read: 'And Moses entered into the midst of the cloud, and went up into the mount' (Ex. xxiv.18), that is, he enveloped himself in the cloud, as in a garment, and then he 'drew near into the thick darkness where God was' (Ex.xx.21)"<sup>150</sup>

Pico had already, in his early work the Commento, propounded views of the divine incommunicability similar to those expressed in the De Ente et Uno, claiming the authority of Plotinus<sup>for</sup> asserting that God "is not an intellectual or intelligent nature, but it<sup>s</sup> ineffably elevated above all intellect and cognition".<sup>151</sup> In this same passage he finds support also from Pseudo-Dionysius, "the first of Christian theologians"

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150. Zohar I, 66a.

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151. Opera Pici, p.734. " . . . Dio non essere natura intellettuale o intelligente, ma sopra ogni intelletto e cognizione ineffabilmente elevato". Cf. Plotinus: Enn. V,vii,40.

("Dyonisio Areopagita, principe de' teologi cristiani"), and so it is not surprising that he should invoke the same authority in support of the position now reached in the De Ente et Uno. The quotation he gives comes from the closing section of the Mystical Theology, where Dionysius asserts that God is neither truth nor dominion nor wisdom nor one nor unity nor deity nor goodness nor spirit, nor is He comparable to any person known to us, neither is there speech whereby to describe Him, nor name nor knowledge, nor is He darkness nor light, nor error nor truth, nor is there any affirmation or negation of Him whatever.<sup>152</sup>

The man who wrote these things was not, as we now know, the person whom Pico and the Schoolmen imagined him to be. Because it was believed that he was the Athenian convert of St. Paul, referred to in Acts xvii.34 as Dionysius the Areopagite, his writings were considered by them to be almost apostolical in character and authority. This accounts for Pico's readiness to lean on Dionysius as an authority practically equivalent to that of Scripture. Not, however, that the authenticity of these writings had never been questioned. They had, as a matter of fact, been circulated early on by those whom the

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<sup>152</sup>. Pseudo-Dionysius: Myst. Theol., cap.V (Migne P.G., III, 1045 ff.)

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orthodox church regarded as heretics. At Constantinople in 533 A.D. the Severians, a Monophysite sect, adduced them in support of their teaching, but the orthodox theologians repudiated them as spurious, declaring that their existence was quite unknown to the early church. In the next century a presbyter named Theodorus produced a book in defence of the authenticity of the Dionysian writings, from which it appears that those who opposed their genuineness did so on the following grounds: that they were not cited by any of the later church teachers; that they do not appear in Eusebius' catalogue of the older fathers; that the traditions to which they refer were formulated only over a long period of years; and that in them quotations occur from the letters of Ignatius, who lived after Dionysius.<sup>153</sup>

Valid though this criticism was, such effect as it had seems to have been somewhat short-lived. In the ninth century John Scotus Erigena translated the Dionysian writings and also composed commentaries on them, and it was really from this time and event that they began to exert their quite remarkable influence on the thought of the Middle Ages. Further commentaries followed from the

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153. V. D. Le Nourry: Dissertatio de Operibus S. Dionysii Areopagitae, in Prolegomena, Migne P.G., III; also Neander: Church History, Vol.V, pp.234 f. (London, 1891).

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pens of Hugh of St. Victor in the twelfth century and Robert Grosseteste, Albert the Great, and, most significant of all, Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. In the Summa Theologica, too, Aquinas makes considerable use of the work of Pseudo-Dionysius, whom he frequently quotes, particularly when dealing with the question of our knowledge of God.

It was left to Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457) to renew the critical examination of these writings which his contemporaries regarded as almost if not quite sacrosanct. The vigour and candour of his penetrating intellect caused him fearlessly to expose error and imposture wherever he found them. He demonstrated conclusively that the so-called Donation of Constantine and the Pseudo-Isidorean Decretals (as they are now known), which for so long had been flourished as authorities for papal dictatorship, were nothing better than forgeries. In similar fashion the Dionysian writings were subjected to the sceptical ray of his critical faculty and shown to be both pseudonymous and unapostolic. The startling boldness of these exposures, together with the confident manner in which he challenged the authenticity of certain of the renderings of the Vulgate, made enemies for him amongst the princes of the Church who were not slow to denounce him as an unchristian monster. Pico could hardly have been unaware of the results of Valla's critical researches. The

likelihood is that, with his predilection for the theology of Neoplatonism, he was disposed to concur with the censures passed by the Church on this scholar. If so, it is perhaps disappointing in view of the inquiring and independent character of Pico's mind; but it must be remembered that Pico was still a young man, and it may not unreasonably be conjectured that had he lived a little longer he would have come to acknowledge the worth of Valla's criticisms.

What is certain is that four or five years after Pico's death, which took place in 1494, the force of Valla's argument convinced the Englishman William Grocyn that the Dionysian works could no longer be treated as genuine. The occasion was an interesting one and also reflected much credit on the open<sup>̄</sup> mindedness of Grocyn, to whom belongs the distinction of having introduced the literature of classical Greece into England. In 1488 he had visited Italy and attended the lectures of Poliziano and Chalcondyles in Florence, where he also met and made friends with other members of the famous circle of Florentine scholars of that day. Some ten years later, as an ardent admirer of Dionysius "the Areopagite", he delivered a course of lectures in St. Paul's Cathedral on the Celestial Hierarchy. To begin with, according to Erasmus,<sup>154</sup> he made a violent attack

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154. Erasmus: Annotationes, on Acts xvii.34.

on those who denied that the author was the genuine Areopagite. But after lecturing for some weeks, further study caused him to change his mind and to acknowledge the work as spurious.

The writings of Valla produced a strong and formative impression on Erasmus himself. Erasmus was Pico's junior by some three years, and as early as 1489 we find him writing to his friend Cornelius Gerard in superlative terms of Lorenzo Valla whom he regarded as beyond compare for sharpness of wit and tenacity of memory.<sup>155</sup> This estimate was formed, it should be remembered, in the face of the current mood which took pleasure in depreciating the worth of this scholar. In a subsequent letter to Cornelius Erasmus speaks of "the unworthy insults with which the doltish high priests of barbarism rave against a most learned man". "What man", he asks towards the end of the same letter, "has a mind so poverty stricken and a heart so shrivelled by jealousy that he cannot have the greatest praise and love for Valla, who with such

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155. Erasmus: Epist., 20, ed. P.S.Allen, Tom.I (Oxford, 1906), p.99: "Porro in elegantiarum obseruantis nemini aeque fidem habeo atque Laurentio Vallensi; cui quem alium et ingenii acumine et memoriae tenacitate conferamus, non habemus".

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industry, such zeal, and such labour refuted the stupidities of the barbarians, rescued from extinction writings well-nigh buried, restored Italy to her pristine splendour of eloquence, and ensured that even the learned should henceforth be compelled to speak with more circumspection?"<sup>156</sup> An exciting event for Erasmus was his discovery, in 1504, of Valla's Annotations on the New Testament (in Latinam Noui Testamenti interpretationem ex collatione Graecorum exemplarium Adnotationes), the perusal of which spurred him on in his ambition to produce a critical edition of the New Testament.<sup>157</sup>

But, to return to the De Ente et Uno, Pico speaks of Dionysius as "uir ille diuinus", a mode of speech normally reserved for the acknowledged doctors of the Church among whom Dionysius had been numbered for centuries past. Although the true identity of the Pseudo-Dionysius has not so far been discovered, there is no doubt that his writings constitute one of the main streams whereby Greek, and in particular Neoplatonic, thought was carried into the

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156. Ibid., 26; pp.112-115.

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157. Ibid., Letter 182, to Christopher Fisher, Papal Protonotary at Paris, pp.407-412. This letter was prefaced to Erasmus' edition of Valla's Annotations, 1505.

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Christian milieu. Pico, it is evident, was considerably indebted to them, especially the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology, in which the author describes the method of intellectual approach to God as twofold: in the first place, positive, by way of affirmation (cataphatic, καταφατική); and, in the second place, negative, by way of denial (apophatic, ἀποφατική). By the former the perfections observed in finite beings are ascribed to God in a transcendental manner: thus, for example, the beauty of God is super-essential beauty and His essence is super-essential essence. In other words, any quality attributed to God must be understood in a sense which completely transcends that quality as far as we are able to know and define it. This conception leads on to the latter method whereby positive affirmation concerning the divine nature is shunned in favour of the way of negation or remotion (via negatiua, via remotionis). Thus, stage by stage, the mind may progress upwards to God until at last it arrives at the super-essential darkness, the darkness of unknowing or of ignorance - the process depicted by Pico as the ascent to the darkness which God inhabits or to the light of ignorance, where, once attained, one is blinded by the darkness of the divine splendour.

The truth is that mere philosophy, mere human wisdom, however ennobled, is quite incompetent to arrive at any cognition or comprehension of God as He really is.

Pico had grasped this truth, and he was increasingly grasping the further truth that it is not the mind but the heart of man that may know God intimately by loving Him. "Words", he writes, "are entirely inadequate and convey far less than is conceived" ("Deficiunt profecto uerba et minus omnino dicitur etiam quam concipitur").

And then the following interjection bursts from him: "But see, dear Angelo, what madness grips us. While we are in the body we are able to love God more than either to speak of or to know Him. By loving we achieve more for ourselves, we toil less, we honour Him more. Yet, by constantly seeking through cognition, we choose never to find that which we seek, rather than by loving to possess it, which, apart from loving, would, even were it found, be to no purpose".

After a further consideration of the relation between ens and unum and between the one and the many, Pico reaches the conclusion that "God is absolutely complete entity, undivided unity, fullest truth, and the most beatific goodness" ("Deus ergo plenissima entitas, indiuidua unitas, solidissima ueritas, beatissima bonitas").

"Unless I am mistaken", he adds characteristically, "this is the well known ΤΕΤΡΑΚΤΟΣ, or quaternity, by which Pythagoras adjured and called the principle of ever-flowing nature".<sup>158</sup>

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158. Cf. Jamblichus: Vita Pythagorae, 82.

We are not entirely unprepared, then, for the high moralizing tone of the final chapter, in which Pico emphasizes the importance of a manner of life which is fitted to the study of so lofty a subject. "We should take care", he says, "lest in the act of studying the highest things we live in a condition which is debased and thus unworthy of these things, for it is heaven's gift to us that we should be able to explore the relations of even heavenly things. It deserves, indeed, the most earnest meditation that this mind of ours, through which even divine things may pass, cannot be the offspring of mortal seed, nor can its future happiness be elsewhere than in the possession of divine things; and the more it lifts and excites itself to divine things, setting aside the concern for earthly things, the nearer does it approach to happiness while it is present here, like a stranger on a pilgrimage. As for this present disquisition, it seems primarily to admonish us that if we wish to be blessed we should imitate God, who is most blessed of all, by possessing in ourselves unity, truth, and goodness.

"Ambition disturbs the peace of unity and violates the soul that clings to it, dragging it this way and that, maiming and distracting it. Who will not lose the splendour and light of truth in the mire and murk of lusts? Cupidity, which is avarice, the most thievish

of all, robs us of goodness; for it is characteristic of goodness that it communicates to others the good things which you possess. Thus when Plato inquires why God founded the world, he says, answering his own question, that it was because He was good.<sup>159</sup> The pride of life, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes are the three things which, as John writes, are of the world and not of the Father,<sup>160</sup> who is unity itself, truth itself, and goodness itself. Let us therefore flee from the world which lies in wickedness,<sup>161</sup> and let us escape to the Father where there is unifying peace, the truest light, and the fullest pleasure. But who will give us wings that we may fly thither?<sup>162</sup> - the love of those things which are above. Who shall deprive us of this? - the lust for the things which are on the earth;<sup>163</sup> for if these are our pursuit, we make shipwreck of unity,

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159. Plato: Tim. 29d-e.

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160. 1 John ii.16.

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161. 1 John v.19.

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162. Cf. Psalm lv.6.

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163. Colossians iii.1 f.

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truth, and goodness. For we are not one if we do not bind together with the bond of virtue our earth-inclined sensual nature and our heavenward-gazing reason, since then there are two rulers in us, ruling as it were by turns, while at one time we follow God by the law of the mind and at another Baal by the law of the flesh,<sup>164</sup> and our kingdom, being divided against itself, is forthwith laid waste.<sup>165</sup> But if we are one in such a way that, reason being enslaved to sense, the law of our members rules alone,<sup>166</sup> this unity will be false because we shall not be our true selves; for we shall be called and shall appear to be men, that is, animals living by reason, whereas in fact we shall be brutes, for whom the sensual appetite counts as law. We shall present an illusion to those who see us and amongst whom we live. The image will not correspond to its exemplar; for we are the likeness of God,<sup>167</sup> and God is spirit<sup>168</sup>; whereas we are not yet

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164. Romans vii. 23,25.

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165. Mark iii.24.

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166. Romans vii.23.

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167. Genesis i.26 f.

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168. John iv.24.

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spiritual (to use Paul's words) but animal.<sup>169</sup> When, however, we through truth have not departed from our exemplar, it will remain for us, reaching out to Him through goodness, to be joined to Him at last.

"And so, if these three things, unum, uerum, and bonum, follow ens in a perpetual alliance, it is evident that when we are not these things we also are not at all, even though we seem to be, and that, even though people believe that we are living, we are in fact continually dying rather than living" ("Quod si tria haec, unum scilicet, uerum, et bonum perpetuo annexu ens consequuntur, reliquum est ut, cum illa non sumus, etiam prorsus non sumus etsi esse uideamur, et, quamuis credamur uiuere, moriamur tamen iugiter quam uiuamus").

Thus ends the De Ente et Uno, not, it will have been observed, without revealing something of the distance Pico had travelled on his spiritual pilgrimage since the fiasco at Rome some four years previously. He has learnt to appreciate not only the value of Christian morality but the vanity of mere worldly ambition. We must not, however, permit the more frequent allusions to biblical passages in the final chapter to obscure the fact that here, as well as in all that precedes, Pico's outlook is

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<sup>169</sup>. This seems to be a faulty recollection of 1 Corinthians iii.1,3; cf. xv.46, Galatians iii.3.

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still far too definitely Platonic to be distinctively Christian; though it is none the less evident that his mind is becoming increasingly receptive of spiritual impressions and that the New Testament is now exercising an influence on his conduct as well as on his thinking.

## CHAPTER VIII

NUMBERS, MAGIC, AND FABLES

The catholicity of Pico's intellectual curiosity led him along some little frequented paths down which his critics were by no means disposed to follow him. On the contrary, they felt that they had ample occasion for suspecting him as a dangerous innovator. In the De Hominis Dignitate, it is true, he himself speaks of his numerology as "another new system of philosophizing", but he immediately adds the qualification that it was, in fact, "ancient, since it was used by the pristine theologians, by Pythagoras particularly, by Aglaophemus, by Philolaus, by Plato, and by the earlier Platonists. Yet in our age", he continues, "distinguished though the other was, it has, thanks to the carelessness of later generations, become so disused that scarcely any vestiges of it are to be found".<sup>170</sup> To his support Pico summons Plato, who maintained that among all the liberal arts and contemplative sciences the science of numbers has pride of place and is most divine, and who, in response to the inquiry: why is man the wisest animal? declared:

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170. Opera Pici, p.326. Cf. Proclus: Comm. Tim., V, proem, Theol. Plat., 1,6.

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because he has knowledge of numbers.<sup>171</sup>

The question, of course, arises as to what was the precise nature of this science of numbers which Pico regarded as so important. We are advised that he certainly does not mean the knowledge of numbers which is necessary for the execution of a merchant's business. Once again he invokes the authority of Plato who "also testifies to this when he admonishes us with his clear voice that we should not understand this divine arithmetic to be the arithmetic of merchants".<sup>172</sup> To this arithmetic so highly lauded Pico says that he devoted many long hours of careful study before venturing to include the following proposition amongst the Nine Hundred Theses: "The way to the investigation and intellection of all that is knowable is found through numbers, and for the verification of this conclusion I promise that I will answer by way of numbers the 74 questions which ensue".<sup>173</sup>

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171. Plato: Epinom. 977 ff.; Republ. VII, 522c. Cf. Aristotle: Probl. XX, 6, 955.

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172. Plato: Republ. VII, 525c.

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~~173. Opera Pici, p. 109: number 24 of conclusiones Magicae numero XXVI secundum opinionem propriam.~~

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These seventy-four questions include many of the most abstruse points of theology and philosophy in the explication of which the Schoolmen had used up many gallons of ink. The following are some examples: whether there is a God; whether he is an infinite being; whether he is the cause of all things; whether his being is absolutely simple; in what manner God has intellection; what number of years is naturally owed to the life of man; whether it is better for God to have caused things than not to have caused them; what the difference is between the mode of understanding of angels and of rational souls; what the difference is between the mode of understanding of God and of angels; whether there can be a plurality of Gods; in what way the essence of creatures differs from the essence of God; when the consummation of the age will take place; whether happiness consists in the intellect or the will; why God is said to have completed everything in six days; what the statement that God rested on the seventh day signifies. The promise to answer such questions by means of the science of numbers caused many a sceptical eyebrow to be raised, nor were the pundits of the papal court disposed to view with favour a stripling who made such extravagant claims.

It is disappointing that the defence of the numerical propositions offered by Pico in his Apologia has the appearance of evading the issue. He does not attempt any

overt demonstration of the method whereby he intended to answer by way of numbers the seventy-four questions to which we have referred; nor does he expound his understanding of the Pythagorean doctrine of numbers which had won his admiration. His concern seems to be rather to attest his orthodoxy by reference to Scripture and certain of the Church Fathers. Alluding to one of his magical conclusions - namely: "From the principles of the more secret philosophy it is necessary to confess that characters and figures have more potency in magical work than any material quality"<sup>173</sup> - he explains that by "the more secret philosophy" he means the Pythagorean system "because it is less known and less in use", but that he had not said "that it was true in itself and in an absolute sense". The Pythagoreans, he points out, held mathematics to be more potent, because more formal, than physics. Regarding the conclusion which immediately precedes this one - namely: "All numbers are magic in material, except three and ten which are formal, and in magical arithmetic they are the numbers of numbers" - he explains that the Pythagoreans considered the more formal numbers to be the more potent: of the uneven numbers, three in particular, and, of the even numbers, ten, since it includes all the numbers; "and

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173. Opera Pici, p. 105: number 24 of conclusiones Magicae numero XXVI secundum opinionem propriam.

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this", he says, "is what I meant by what I said about the numbers three and ten in natural magic".<sup>174</sup>

But now for the Church Fathers, who were far more likely to dazzle Pico's inquisitors. First of all Hilary is invoked as holding that the Psalms were arranged in their present order by the authors of the Septuagint version of the Old Testament who "understood by spiritual and celestial science the virtue of the Psalms and arranged them in number and order, assigning to each, by the order of the perfect and efficient Psalms, a number in accordance with its efficiency and potency". From this Pico concludes that "it is unmistakably evident that number gives virtue and efficiency". The next witness to be called is Jerome, who asserts that twenty is an unlucky number and two a bad number - hence it was not said on the second day of creation "And God saw that it was good", and the unclean animals went into the ark by twos, but the clean by sevens - while the number ten is praised by him.<sup>175</sup> "You will find similar things a hundred times over", affirms Pico, quite rightly, "in Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, Ambrose, Origen, Augustine, and others. Moreover, Rabanus, an illustrious doctor of the Church, composed a special book concerning the

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<sup>174</sup>. Ibid., p. 172.

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<sup>175</sup>. Jerome: *Reference not traced*

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virtue of numbers;<sup>176</sup> and you will always find that the ecclesiastical doctors everywhere observe the properties of numbers, even when, if one may say so, it is only for the sake of curiosity".

Pico reminds his readers that the mystery of the number three was contemplated by the Fathers in the substantial godhead, in the three days during which Christ lay in the sepulchre, in the three dispensations of nature, law, and grace, and so on. It was on account of the occult property of the number forty that Moses, Elijah, and Christ all fasted for forty days, that Christ was forty hours in hades and ascended forty days after the resurrection, that Nineveh was to be destroyed after forty days, and that God sent rain upon the earth for a period of forty days and nights. The number fifty was associated with the remission of sins, the position of the fiftieth Psalm, Miserere mei Deus,<sup>177</sup> and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Similarly, "a certain secret property" was assigned to the

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176. Rabanus: Liber de Computo (Migne P.L., CVII, 669 ff.)

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177. Though the fiftieth Psalm in the Vulgate and Septuagint versions, it is actually the fifty-first in the Hebrew original (and also in the English versions).

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number twelve, since it is the number of the tribes of Israel, of the Apostles, and of the stones of the heavenly Jerusalem.

Pico gives many more examples of the significant associations of numbers as expounded by acknowledged teachers of the Church, "who always affirm that nothing is by chance, but that God has disposed all things by His own wisdom, not only in weight and measurement, but also in number". It can only be regretted that Pico, in his concern to vindicate the catholic orthodoxy of his belief in the mystic properties of numbers has not left us an exegesis of the principles of what he calls "the more secret philosophy". "I adduce nothing", he says in making his defence, "from medical men, from astrologers, and from philosophers, especially the Platonists and Pythagoreans, but only from our own ecclesiastical doctors. When we inquire whether it is in any way repugnant to the truth of the catholic faith to believe that there are properties and certain natural virtues in numbers, and when we see that, as I have said, these have been noticed, perchance as a curiosity, by catholic authors, then there is no further reason why we should doubt that such an opinion should not be rejected as heretical". He gives the assurance that in speaking of figures and numbers he does not do so "with reference to their superstitious use in making pacts and agreements with demons", as he had

taken care to point out in the first of his twenty-six magical conclusions.

Regarding the exceptional importance attached by the Pythagorean philosophy to the qualities of numbers, the following passage from Aristotle may at least serve to give some indication of the lines along which Pico's mind had been working. "The Pythagoreans", says the Stagyrte, "applied themselves to mathematics and were the first to develop this science and through studying it they came to believe that its principles are the principles of everything. And since numbers are by nature first among these principles, they fancied that they could detect in numbers, to a greater extent than in fire and earth and water, many analogues of what is and what comes into being - such and such a property of number being justice, and such and such soul or mind, another opportunity, and similarly, more or less, with all the rest - and since they saw further that the properties and ratios of the musical scales are based on numbers, and since it seemed clear that all other things have their whole nature modelled upon numbers, and that numbers are the ultimate things in the whole physical universe, they assumed the elements of numbers to be the elements of everything, and the whole universe to be a proportion of number"<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>178</sup>. Aristotle: Metaphys. 985<sup>b</sup>24-986<sup>a</sup>4. (Loeb translation).

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number is the bond of the universe and the principle regulating the generation or bringing into being of all things.<sup>181</sup> Porphyry cites Moderatus, who wrote eleven books on the science of numbers, as saying that the Pythagoreans, being unable to express clearly in words the primary forms and principles because of their abstruse nature, resorted to numbers in the interests of precise teaching.<sup>182</sup>

Plato, it will be remembered, regarded "arithmetic and computation" or "the distinction between one and two and three" as something fundamental to all arts, concepts, and sciences.<sup>183</sup> Arithmetic and computation, he maintained, conduce towards truth, and are necessary no less for the philosopher if he is to arrive at an understanding of real being than for the military man if he is dispose his troops successfully. The study of numbers is advocated, "not in any commonplace sense - not for the sake of buying and selling, as is the case with anxious merchants and retailers -,

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181. Plotinus: Enn. VI, 6.

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182. Porphyry: Vita Pythag. 48.

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183. Plato: Republ. VII, 522C.

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but with a view to attaining to the contemplation of the nature of numbers by the intellect itself, and that the soul may with ease turn towards truth and real being". This science of numbers "powerfully leads the soul upwards and compels it to reason concerning the essence of numbers themselves, without in any way permitting a person to reason by advancing numbers with visible and tangible bodies".<sup>184</sup> Elsewhere he speaks of number as the principle underlying our understanding of time which, according to him, is the sensible image of the eternity which belongs to the intelligible universe.<sup>185</sup>

Sufficient has been said to indicate the great and indeed ultimate significance assigned to the esoteric knowledge of numbers in the Pythagorean system. Whether or not Pico had arrived at any adequate comprehension of this abstract philosophy is a question which, unfortunately, must remain unresolved. Pico, as has been seen, appealed in his Apologia to the Church Fathers in support of his contention that there are certain essential properties inherent in numbers themselves. What he did not mention there, although he was undoubtedly aware of the fact, was that the Pythagoreans, long before the Church Fathers, had

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184. Ibid. 525 c-d.

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185. Plato: Tim. 37d-38a.

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head and taught the same belief. They expounded the number one as the ground of unity, identity, and equality, and as the cause of the coherence and consistency of all things; while the number two was essentially the ground of diversity, inequality, and division. Again, as it is in the nature of things to have a beginning, a middle, and an end, so it was taught that this was due to the essential nature of the number three. And the number ten was acclaimed as the most perfect of all numbers since it embraces within itself every distinction of number and every form of logic and analogy.<sup>186</sup> Numbers, then, were respected by Pico, as by the Pythagoreans and many others before him, as a doorway to the understanding of the metaphysical world.

That a section of his theses should have been associated with the subject of magic was denounced as scandalous by those who wished to silence Pico with the accusation of heresy. All along, however, Pico had been careful to make a distinction between two different kinds of magic. In the first of the magical conclusions he repudiates contemporary magic, "which the Church deservedly exterminates", as having "no solidity, no foundation, no truth", and as a fabrication of the powers of

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186. Porphyry: Vita Pythag. 49-52.

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darkness.<sup>187</sup> But the immediately following conclusion affirms that "natural magic is lawful and not prohibited" ("Magia naturalis licita est et non prohibita"). Pico had not failed to anticipate that some elucidation of the precise import of this "natural magic" would be required lest it should be confused with that magic which is illicit, for in the De Hominis Dignitate, with which he had intended to introduce his Nine Hundred Theses, he had been at some pains to explain the difference between these two forms of magic. "I have also propounded magical theses (magica theoremata)", he writes, "in which the term magic has a double significance, the one consisting entirely in the work and authority of demon<sup>s</sup> - something altogether execrable and unnatural -; whereas the other, when it is carefully investigated, is nothing else than the absolute consummation of natural philosophy. When the Greeks speak of the former they call it *γοητεία*, since they do not deem it in any way worthy of the name of magic; but the latter they call by the proper and

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187. Opera Pici, p. 104. "Tota Magia, quae in usu est apud modernos, et quam merito exterminat ecclesia, nullam habet firmitatem, nullum fundamentum, nullam ueritatem, quia pendet ex manu hostium primae ueritatis, postestatum harum tenebrarum, quae tenebras falsitatis, male dispositis intellectibus obfundunt".

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peculiar name of *μάγεία*, as much as to say that it is the perfection and peak of wisdom; for, as Porphyry says, the word 'magus' in the Persian language signifies the same as a devotee and interpreter of divine things among us. 188

"There is, however, a great, indeed the greatest, disparity between these two arts: the former is condemned and execrated not only by the Christian religion, but by all laws and by practically every government that has been set up; but the latter is approved and embraced by all wise men and by all those nations that make a study of celestial and divine things. The former is the most fraudulent of the arts; the latter is firm, reliable, and constant. Those who have cultivated the former have always dissimulated (which in authors should be something ignominious and disgraceful); from the latter the highest brilliance and glory of literature was sought of old and almost at all times. No student of the former was ever a philosopher and a man eager to learn the good arts; but Pythagoras, Empedocles, Democritus, and Plato crossed the seas to learn the latter and returned to proclaim it, and

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188. Porphyry: De Abstin. IV, 16: *πικρά γε μὴν τοῖς Περσῶν οἱ περὶ τὸ θεῖον σοφοὶ καὶ τούτου θεράποντες μάγοι μὲν προσαγορεύονται· τούτο γὰρ δηλοῖ κατὰ τὴν ἐπιχώριον διάλεκτον ὁ μάγος.*

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held it to be of pre-eminent importance among the mysteries".<sup>189</sup>

Pico points out that "natural magic" can boast a most distinguished parentage, with Zamolxis and Zoroaster as its chief exponents. "If we interrogate Plato as to which of the two is magic", he says, "he will reply in

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189. Pico seems to be very much indebted to Pliny in this particular passage, as the following comparison of texts will show. Pico: "ad hanc Pythagoras, Empedocles, Democritus, Plato, discendam nauigauere, hanc praedicaerunt reuersi, et in arcanis praecipuam habuerunt". Pliny: "certe Pythagoras, Empedocles, Democritus, Plato ad hanc discendam nauigauere exiliis uerius quam peregrinationibus susceptis, hanc reuersi praedicaere, hanc in arcanis habuere" - Nat. Hist. XXX, i, 2. The similarity extends also to other points, such as that in the Odyssey Homer's main concern is with this science of magic, and the reference to Eudoxus and Hermippus, which Pico makes a little lower down. This looks like plagiarism, but in fairness to Pico it must be said that he is generally careful to acknowledge his sources; hence it may well be that, at the time of writing, the borrowing was unconscious.

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the Alcibiades that the magic of Zoroaster is none other than the science of divine things in which the Persian kings instructed their sons so that they might be thoroughly competent to rule their own republic after the pattern of the mundane republic.<sup>190</sup> He will reply in the Charmides that the magic of Zamolxis is the medicine of the soul through which sobriety (temperantia) is provided for the soul, just as health for the body through ordinary medicine.<sup>191</sup> Vestiges of these things persisted thereafter in the writings of Charondas, Damigeron,

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190. " . . . ad exemplar mundanae reipublicae"; sc. after the pattern of the laws governing the natural realm. Plato: Alcib. I, 122a, where Socrates explains to Alcibiades how the heir to the Persian throne was instructed by the wisest of his four tutors in "the magic of Zoroaster, that is, the service of the gods (Θεῶν Θρακεία)!"

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191. Plato: Charm. 156d, where Socrates tells how he learnt a charm (ἐπωδή) from one of the Thracian physicians of Zamolxis, who are said to strive after immortality, and who attempt to heal not only the whole body, but also the soul by their medicine. He, however, who possesses σωφροσύνη (which Pico renders by temperantia) has no need of the charms of Zamolxis - ibid. 158b.

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Apollonius, Hostanes, and Dardanus,<sup>192</sup> and also in Homer who, as I shall prove some time in my Theology of the Poets,<sup>193</sup> disguised this science, in the same way that he did all the other sciences under the cloak of the wanderings of Ulysses.<sup>194</sup> Vestiges persisted also in Eudoxus and Hermippus, and in practically all who have examined closely the Pythagorean and Platonic mysteries. Of the more recent authors who were experienced

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192. Cf. Tertullian: De Anima LVII, where the following list of magical authors is given: Hostanes, Typhon, Dardanus, Damigeron, Nectabis, and Berenice.

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193. " . . . in poetica nostra Theologia" - another work projected but apparently never written by Pico, in which it was his intention to show that deep and esoteric doctrines were concealed under the simple exterior of the writings of the ancient poets. This idea contributed to a dominant theme in his thinking which recurs, as we shall see, when he turns his attention to the subject of the Jewish Cabala. That he intended to write a Poetica Theologia is also mentioned in the early Commento, ad fin. - Opera Pici, p.758.

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194. For an essay in this genre with which Pico was very probably familiar, cf. Porphyry's treatise "on the Cave of the Nymph's in the Odyssey".

in this kind of magic I find three, Alkindi the Arab,<sup>195</sup> Roger Bacon,<sup>196</sup> and William of Paris.<sup>197</sup> Plotinus also mentions this art in the place where he demonstrates that magic is the minister and not the lord of nature; indeed, this most learned man approves and confirms this form of magic, but the other he so abhors that when he was called to the rites of evil demons he said that it was more correct that they should be summoned to him than he to them - and very properly so!<sup>198</sup>

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195. A ninth century Arab, several of whose works were translated from Arabic into Latin in the twelfth century by Gerard of Cremona.

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196. The "Doctor Mirabilis" of the thirteenth century who held, in his Opus Maius, mathematics to be the "door and key" to the other sciences, including theology (cf. Pico's numerological propositions supra), and chided the Latins for allowing a science to fall into neglect that had been cultivated by the Chaldeans, Egyptians, and Greeks.

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197. Sc. William of Auvergne, who was Bishop of Paris from 1228 to 1249. We shall find Pico invoking his authority jointly with that of Albert the Great in this connection in the Apologia.

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198. Plotinus: Enn. IV, iv, 40 ff.

Porphyry: Vita Plot. X.

"Just as the one renders man subject and enslaved to the powers of wickedness, so the other makes him their ruler and lord. The one cannot even claim to itself the name of art or science, whereas the other is full of the highest mysteries and embraces the profoundest contemplation of the most secret things and, indeed, the cognition of the whole of nature. . . . Just as the farmer weds elms to vines, so the magus weds earth to heaven, that is, the things below to the dowries and potencies of the things above.<sup>199</sup> And so it is that as the one form of magic is manifestly monstrous and harmful, so the other is manifestly divine and salutary; and in particular for this reason, that the former, by enslaving man to the enemies of God, calls him away from God, whereas the latter arouses in him that admiration of the works of God which is attended most surely by zealous charity, faith, and hope. For there is nothing that provides a greater impulse towards religion and the worship of God than a constant contemplation of the wonders of God". Pico adds that "there are many who, just as dogs always bark at unknown persons, likewise frequently

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199. Cf. No.5 - "Nulla est uirtus in coelo aut in terra seminaliter et separata, quam et actuare et unire magus non possit" - and no.13 - "Magicam operari non est aliud quam maritare mundum" - of the magical theses.

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condemn and hate those things which they do not understand".

This, then, is what he has to say about magic in the De Hominis Dignitate, and it may be mentioned that the style and fluency of his Latin are here as well as elsewhere by no means unimpressive. There is a further quotation from Aristotle of which, had he been acquainted with it, Pico would doubtless have been glad to avail himself in his effort to emphasize the distinction between the true and the false magic, between *μαγεία* proper and *γοητεία*. This is the fragment in which the Greek philosopher asserts that "the magi had no knowledge of the magic of witchcraft" (*τῆν γοητικὴν μαγείαν οὐδ' ἔγνωνσαν οἱ μάγοι*)<sup>200</sup>.

The third and fourth of Pico's magical conclusions assert that "magic is the practical part of natural science" and that it is also "the noblest part of natural science",<sup>201</sup> and by natural science he meant the knowledge of the laws governing the realm of nature. The knowledge of these cosmic principles brings also the power to control and make use of them - something firmly maintained by the

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200. Aristotle: Fragm. 31.

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201. Opera Pici, p.104. 3: "Magia est pars practica scientiae naturalis"; 4: "Ex ista conclusione . . . sequitur quod Magia sit nobilissima pars scientiae naturalis".

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sages of antiquity. Hence Pico's next conclusion affirms the ability of the magus to activate and unite the potencies of the universe.<sup>202</sup>

From a study of the propositions devoted to magic it is plain that Pico coupled with it the Jewish Cabala as something complementary to it. Thus he was prepared to defend the thesis "that there can be no magical operation of any efficacy unless it has the work of Cabala as an adjunct, either explicit or implicit".<sup>203</sup> Indeed, in the most notorious of all the Nine Hundred Theses Pico declares that "there is no science that makes us more certain of the divinity of Christ than magic and Cabala".<sup>204</sup> We shall be dealing with Pico's approach to the Cabala in the next chapter, but meantime it is of interest to observe that he was prepared to ascribe the occurrence of marvels to magical and cabalistic operations, though only, it is true, in a secondary sense. Thus he offered to defend the proposition that "whatever marvellous work may take

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<sup>202</sup>. For the text of this conclusion v. footnote 199 supra.

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<sup>203</sup>. Opera Pici, p.105. No. 15 of the magical conclusions: "Nulla potest esse operatio magica alicuius efficaciae nisi annexum habeat opus Cabalae explicitum uel implicitum".

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<sup>204</sup>. Ibid. No.9: "Nulla est scientia quae nos magis certificet de diuinitate Christi quam Magia et Cabala".

place, whether it is magical or cabalistic or of any other kind, it must most of all be referred to the glorious and blessed Deity, whose grace every day liberally rains supercelestial waters of marvellous powers upon contemplative men of good will".<sup>205</sup>

To the ecclesiastical court before which he was arraigned Pico attempted to explain his position by saying that an investigation of what he calls "natural" magic and Cabala convinces one that Christ's miracles testify to His divinity, because it becomes evident from such an investigation that they cannot have been performed by any natural power, but by the power of God alone.

"Through the knowledge of natural science", he says, "we see that the works of Christ exceed the degree and limit of those things which can be performed by natural agents, and we necessarily conclude that they were performed by divine power - something which apart from this knowledge we should not be able to know. For when the limits of the potency and virtue of natural things are unknown, we are in a position of doubt as to whether the works which

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205. Ibid. No.6: "Quodcunque fiat opus mirabile, siue sit magicum, siue cabalisticum, siue cuiuscunque alterius generis, principalissime referendum est in Deum gloriosum et benedictum, cuius gratis<sup>a</sup> supercoelestes mirabilium uirtutum aquas super contemplatiuos homines bonae uoluntatis quotidie pluit liberaliter".

Christ performed could have been performed by natural means".<sup>206</sup> Thus by a sort of process of subtraction it could be held that natural magic makes us certain of the divinity of Christ.

He quite justly reminded the court that among his magical conclusions was one which expressly stated that "the works of Christ could not have been performed either by means of magic or by means of Cabala"; that is to say, they were the immediate effects of His divine power, as is implied in the next proposition: "The miracles of Christ are the most certain argument of His divinity, not by reason of the thing performed, but by reason of the mode of performing it".<sup>207</sup>

"Since therefore", says Pico, continuing his defence, "the greatest knowledge of such things is contained in that part of Cabala which treats of the powers of the celestial

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<sup>206.</sup> Opera Pici, pp.167 f.

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<sup>207.</sup> Ibid., p.105. Nos. 7 and 8 of the magical conclusions. 7: "Non potuerunt opera Christi uel per uiam Magiae uel per uiam Cabalae fieri"; 8: "Miracula Christi non ratione rei factae sed ratione modi faciendi suae diuinitatis argumentum certissimum sunt". Centuries earlier Origen had rebutted the taunt of Celsus that Christ's miracles had been performed by means of magic which He had learnt during His exile in Egypt - Origen: Contra Celsum I, xxxviii, lxviii.

bodies and in that part of natural science which I now call natural magic (and a considerable number of catholic doctors have named it so, and others would wish to give it that name), I have not spoken heretically or superstitiously, but scientifically and most truly and catholically, in asserting that by such magic and Cabala we are helped to a knowledge of the divinity of Christ". He complains that because his accusers could not tolerate the name of magic they had been shouting throughout all the city that he approved of necromancy, which the whole Church condemned. He reminds them that "magic" is an equivocal term, which may refer to "what is called necromancy which is performed through pacts and alliances with demons", or to "the practical part of natural science" by which the performance of wonderful works by the medium of natural forces is taught; "and this", he says, "the Church has never condemned, nor can condemn it: on the contrary, a considerable number of ecclesiastical and catholic doctors have approved and followed it".

Having cited William of Auvergne - "summus theologus" - and Albert the Great - "uir catholicus et sanctissimus" - as witnesses for the defence, he challenges his adversaries to state whether what he has called natural magic "is a prohibited thing, or whether it contains anything which is contrary to the faith". The equivocation of the term is not his fault but the result of ancient usage, nor

is it his duty to invent new terms in order to eliminate any possibility of scandal to the faithful. "I am not an innovator", he rejoins, "in giving the name of magic to this science, but many holy and learned men before me have called it so: they should be arraigned, they should be condemned, if it is a damnable thing to assign this name to this science". Pico reminds his readers that the word "magus" is neither Latin nor Greek, but Persian in origin, and that the Persian magi corresponded to the Greek philosophers, to the Hebrew prophets and cabalists, to the Indian gymnosophists, and to the Egyptian priests - for magic was a synonym for wisdom. "If, therefore, magic is the same as wisdom", he continues, "deservedly did they wish to call this practical part of natural science, which presupposes the exact and absolute cognition of all natural things as though it were the apex and peak of the whole of philosophy, by the particular and appropriate name of 'magic', that is, 'wisdom', just as we call Rome 'the city', Virgil 'the poet', and Aristotle 'the philosopher'".

And here he adds a neat thrust: "If we have such an abhorrence for this name magus, we will not patiently hear the Gospel when it tells us that magi<sup>208</sup> came from the East to worship Christ. Those magi were not necromancers, in league with demons, who came to worship the enemy of demons, even the Lord who was soon to triumph

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208. Matthew ii.1, Vulgate.

over them; but they were wise men, learned in the knowledge of celestial and terrestrial things, who venerated and paid homage to the very Wisdom of the Father, made visible in a human body".<sup>209</sup> Pico therefore maintained that his magical conclusions ought never to have been held suspect by the court before which he was arraigned, especially (to quote his own words) "as I have said in the first of these conclusions that I repudiate that magic which is prohibited by the Church, and I condemn and detest it, protesting that I am speaking only of natural magic".<sup>210</sup>

Despite his assertion that the works of Christ were not attributable to magic, it seems that Pico regarded God's work in creation as a work of magic, for he had offered to defend the propositions that "voices and words have efficacy in magical work because that through which nature first exercises magic is the voice of God", and that "any voice has potency in magic only in so far as it is formed by the voice of God". "In magic", he adds in

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209. Origen, however, had been of the opinion that the magi spoken of the Gospel were "on familiar terms with evil spirits", or necromancers, who, led by the heavenly sign, had come to Bethlehem to learn the reason for the failure of their magic art at the time of the birth of Christ - Origen: Contra Celsum LX.

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210. Opera Pici. n 170

the next thesis, "voices that are not significant are more powerful than those that are, and he who is profound will be able to understand the reason for this conclusion from the one which precedes". As for words, or names (nomina), which are significant, "taken singly and per se, they can have no potency in magical work unless they are Hebrew words or very closely derived from Hebrew".<sup>211</sup>

This last proposition further helps to indicate the association which Pico envisaged between magic and Cabala. The wonder-working potency of Hebrew words rested on the

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211. Ibid., p.105. These are numbers 19 to 22 of the magical conclusions.

19: "Ideo uoces et uerba in magico opere efficaciam habent, quia illud in quo primum Magicam exercet natura uox est Dei".

20: "Quaelibet uox uirtutem habet in Magia, in quantum Dei uoce formatur".

21: "Non significatiuae uoces plus possent in Magia quam significatiuae, et rationem conclusionis intelligere potest qui est profundus ex praecedenti conclusione".

22: "Nulla nomina ut significatiua<sup>a</sup>, et in quantum nomina sunt, singula et per se sumpta, in magico opere uirtutem habere possunt, nisi sint Hebraica, uel inde proxime deriuata".

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cabalistic concept of Hebrew not only as the original language of mankind, but as the language of the celestial beings and, indeed, of God Himself. Hence the voice of God uttered at creation was a Hebrew utterance and, as such, a magical and efficacious utterance.

To the magical propositions Pico conjoined a number of Orphic propositions, which he introduced as follows: "Thirty-one conclusions following my own opinion concerning the manner of understanding the hymns of Orpheus according to magic, that is, the secret wisdom of divine and natural things first discovered in them by me".<sup>212</sup> In the first of these he explains that, "as it is not lawful to expound publicly the secret magic first elicited by me from the hymns of Orpheus, so by a sort of concession, as will appear in the following conclusions, to have demonstrated it by the headings of aphorisms will be useful for stirring up the minds of contemplative men". In the next he affirms that "if the requisite music, application of soul, and other conditions known to the sages, are present, nothing is more

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212. Ibid., p.106. "Conclusiones numero XXXI secundum propriam opinionem de modo intelligendi hymnos Orphei secundum Magiam, id est, secretam diuinarum rerum naturaliumque sapientiam a me primum in eis repertam".

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efficacious in natural magic than the hymns of Orpheus". As with magic, so the Orphic hymns have an affinity with Cabala and also with Christian truth, as the following cryptic theses serve to indicate: "Just as the hymns of David are marvellously subservient to the work of Cabala, so are the hymns of Orpheus to the work of truly lawful and natural magic"; "Night in Orpheus is the same as En Soph in Cabala"; "Typhon in Orpheus is the same as Zamael in Cabala"; "The names of the gods, which Orpheus sings, are not the names of deceiving demons, from whom evil and not good proceeds, but of the natural and divine forces which have been distributed in the world by the true God for the benefit especially of man, if he knows how to use them".<sup>213</sup>

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 213. Ibid. Numbers 1, 2, 4, 15, 13, and 3 of the Orphic conclusions.

1: "Sicut secretam Magiam a nobis primum ex Orphei hymnis elicita fas non est in publicum explicare: ita nutu quodam ut in infra scriptis fiet conclusionibus eam per aphorismorum capita demonstrasse utile erit ad excitandas contemplatiuorum mentes".

2: "Nihil efficacius hymnis Orphei in naturali Magia, si debita musica, animi intentio, et caeterae circumstantiae, quas norunt sapientes, fuerint adhibitae".

4: "Sicut hymni Daud operi Cabalae mirabiliter

The myth-shrouded Orpheus had been venerated by the Greeks as the greatest of the pre-Homeric poets and a fount of mystical knowledge. The terms Orphic, Bacchic, Egyptian, and Pythagorean were closely linked to the celebration of the rites observed by the sectaries who claimed Orpheus as their master;<sup>214</sup> indeed, Pythagoras was reputed to have founded his theology of number on that of Orpheus, as Pico had pointed out in his De Hominis Dignitate: "Jamblichus the Chalcidean writes<sup>215</sup> that Pythagoras held the Orphic theology as a model in conformity with which he elaborated and moulded his own philosophy. They say, too, that the sayings of Pythagoras are called

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4: (cont'd.) deseruiunt, ita hymni Orphei operi uere licitae et naturalis Magiae".

15: "Idem est nox apud Orpheum et Ensoph in Cabala".

13: "Idem est Typhon apud Orpheum et Zamael in Cabala".

3: "Nomina deorum, quos Orpheus canit, non decipientium daemonum, a quobus malum et non bonum prouenit, sed naturalium uirtutum, diuinarumque sunt nomina a uero Deo in utilitatem maxime hominis, si eis uti sciuerit, mundo distributarum".

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214. Cf. Herodotus: Hist. II, 81.

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215. Jamblichus: Vita Pythag. XXVIII, 145 f.

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sacred for the very reason that they flow from the teachings of Orpheus; and it is from here that the secret doctrine of numbers and whatever is great and sublime in Greek philosophy has emanated, as from the prime source".<sup>216</sup>

The subject of the Orphic hymns affords Pico yet another occasion for the development of one of his favourite themes, namely, that the deepest secrets of the universe are concealed beneath the unpromising surface of the most ancient writings. "In conformity with the custom of the ancient theologians", he says, "Orpheus covered over the mysteries of his doctrines with the camouflage of fables and disguised them with the veil of poetry, so that, should anyone read his hymns, he would not believe that there was anything below the surface except pretty tales and the merest trifles" ("ita Orpheus suorum dogmatum mysteria fabularum intexit inuolucris et poetico uelamento dissimulauit, ut si quis legat illius hymnos, nihil subesse credat praeter fabellas nugasque meracissimas"). Pico goes on to speak of the great labour and difficulty with which he had succeeded in digging out the hidden meanings and secret riddles of the Orphic philosophy from

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216. Opera Pici, p.330.

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"the dark recesses of the fables" - a task all the more formidable in view of the fact that in "a matter so onerous, so abstruse, and so unexplored" the aid which might have been provided from the researches of earlier interpreters was entirely lacking.<sup>217</sup>

It is evident, then, that Pico regarded the Orphic hymns as a treasury of pristine though occult truth. Was it not reputed that Orpheus had visited Egypt and studied the Mosaic writings there? Reuchlin, Pico's contemporary and disciple, was of the opinion that Pythagoras, who had also been in Egypt, had imported cabalistic doctrines into Greece.<sup>218</sup> Plato, too, it will be remembered, was alleged (somewhat anachronistically) to have met Jeremiah in Egypt and learnt the Mosaic doctrines from him.<sup>219</sup> Thus everything fitted into a convenient pattern: all branches of learning and the systems of all the sages stemmed from the one trunk and proclaimed the same truth. The

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217. Opera Pici, p.331.

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218. Reuchlin: De Arte Cabalistica, pp. 3045, 3054, 3099, 3103, 3161 - edition included in the 1572 volume of Pico's works, where the pagination of the De Arte Cab. starts at 3001.

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219. Cf. Augustine: Christ. Doct. II, xxviii (where this is asserted); Retract. II, iv, 2 (where this is retracted).

hierarchical succession led from Moses to Pico via Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato, Plotinus, and the Alexandrian Fathers - and, in fact, via any other route that might appear attractive.

It is unfortunate for Pico and his conclusions that the so-called Orphic hymns to which he devoted such close study were figments of the same period as Neoplatonism and not the primitive writings that he believed them to be. Pico's whole outlook at this period may be described as Neoplatonic rather than Christian and much of his enthusiasm, though earnest and diligent, is sadly misplaced. A consideration of the fact that a leading Neoplatonist like Porphyry, the pupil of Plotinus and biographer of Pythagoras, published numerous volumes in which he attacked Christians and ridiculed their Bible should at least have made Pico more cautious in his acceptance of the Orphic-cum-Neoplatonic farrago.

Here once again, then, we are confronted with evidence of Pico's obsession with the idea that there must be an inner harmony of all philosophies and all religions, no matter how diverse they may appear to be outwardly. The plain, open sense of different writings may seem to be commonplace in the extreme and deficient in any profound significance, but the ancient philosophers and poets had wisely veiled their message from the vulgar throng under

the cloak of ordinary terms and expressions, so that only one instructed in deep mysteries could hope to penetrate to and appropriate for himself the esoteric secret, the cosmic key, hidden beneath the rough external cortex; but with this key in his possession the harmony of the whole universe was unlocked and disclosed for his contemplation. Hence for the studious Pico all paths lead to the truth - whether it be Moses or Orpheus or Hermes or Zoroaster or Homer or Plato or Aristotle or Magic or Cabala or Neoplatonism or Arabian philosophy - provided only one can discover the solvent which will dissolve all the external antagonisms and resolve them into an agreeable homogeneity. It is then that a proposition such as the following becomes possible: "What the Cabalists call \*<sup>220</sup> is without doubt the same as is named Pallas by Orpheus, the paternal mind by Zoroaster, the son of God by Hermes Trismegistus, wisdom by Pythagoras, and the intelligible sphere by Parmenides".<sup>221</sup> Impelled

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220. The Hebrew term is not given in the text, but an asterisk is substituted for it.

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221. Opera Pici, p.108. Number 10 of the cabalistic conclusions: "Illud quod apud Cabalistas dicitur \* illud est sine dubio quod ab Orpheo Pallas, a Zoroastre paterna mens, a Mercurio Dei filius, a Pythagora sapientia, a Parmenide sphaera intelligibilis nominatur".

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by this prepossession, Pico went on to discover many remarkable things which in truth were not there: they were but an intellectual mirage, enticing perhaps, but unsubstantial.

CHAPTER IXTHE SECRET TRADITION

We have already remarked that the most notorious of Pico's Nine Hundred Theses is the one which affirms that "there is no science which makes us more certain of the divinity of Christ than magic and Cabala". In coming forward as an expositor of the Jewish cabalistic writings Pico wished not only to refute the Jewish calumniators of Christianity by demonstrating that their own sages had passed down teachings which were entirely consonant with the distinctive tenets of the Christian faith, but also to convince the leaders of the Church that the doctrines of the Cabala afforded a valuable corroboration of Catholic truth. In the De Hominis Dignitate he explains that he had adduced those things which he had extracted from the ancient mysteries of the Hebrews "with a view to confirming the sacred Catholic faith", and that it was his desire "that everybody should understand what they are and of what nature, whence they were sought, by which illustrious authors they have been confirmed, how they have been preserved, how divine they are, how necessary for men of our own day for the defence of religion against the churlish calumnies of the Hebrews, lest perchance they should be considered by those to whom they are unknown to be

but worthless scribblings or fairy-tales of charlatans".<sup>222</sup>

The fact is, according to Pico, that when Moses was entrusted with the law at Sinai, which he set down in five books, he received from God at the same time an esoteric exposition of the law which was not committed to writing because it was not intended for the mass of the people. This secret interpretation he was to divulge to Joshua only, and Joshua was thereafter to reveal it along the line of the priestly succession "in a great religion of silence" ("magna silenti religione"). This, in Pico's view, was only fitting, since "it was enough for the common people that by simple history the power of God, His anger against the wicked, His mercy towards the good, and His justice towards all should be known, and that by divine and salutary precepts they should be instructed in the life of goodness and blessing and in the cultivation of true religion. But to set openly before the people the esoteric mysteries and secrets of the highest divinity which lie hidden beneath the shell of the law and the rough cloak of words, what would that be except to give what is sacred to dogs and to scatter pearls among swine?"<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>222.</sup> Opera Pici, p. 328.

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<sup>223.</sup> Matthew vii.6.

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And so it was not by human counsel, but by divine precept, that they kept from the masses those things which are to be communicated to the perfect, among whom alone Paul said that he spoke wisdom".

Pico's reference here is to St. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians ii.6. But it must be objected that this is an illegitimate, and indeed a typically Gnostic, interpretation of the Apostle's statement; for the ensuing verses make it plain that by "those that are perfect" he means all Christians without distinction: the Holy Spirit reveals the hidden wisdom of God to every believing heart. To impose a Gnostic or Neoplatonic significance on this verse is to do violence to the whole context. Bishop Lightfoot's comments on St. Paul's use of the word "perfect" (τέλειος) are worth repeating: "While employing the favourite Gnostic term", he says, "the Apostle strikes at the root of the Gnostic doctrine. The language descriptive of the heathen mysteries is transferred by him to the Christian dispensation, that he may thus more effectively contrast the things signified. The true Gospel also has its mysteries, its hierophants, its initiation: but these are open to all alike. In Christ every believer is τέλειος, for he has been admitted as ἐπόπτης of its most profound, most awful

secrets".<sup>224</sup> And his observations on the history of the word "apocrypha" are very much to the point in connection with the hypothesis of a secret tradition which Pico had adopted: "As before in *τελειος* (i.28), so here again in *ἀπόκρυφοί* the Apostle adopts a favourite term of the Gnostic teachers, only that he may refute a favourite doctrine. The word apocrypha was especially applied to those esoteric writings for which sectarians claimed an auctoritas secreta (Aug. c.Faust. xi.2, VIII.p.219) and which they carefully guarded from publication after the manner of their Jewish prototypes the Essenes. . . . Thus the word apocrypha in the first instance was an honourable appellation applied by the heretics themselves to their esoteric doctrine and their secret books; but owing to the general character of these works the term, as adopted by orthodox writers, got to signify 'false', 'spurious'. The early fathers never apply it, as it is now applied, to deutero-canonical writings, but confine it to supposititious and heretical works".<sup>225</sup>

In support of his thesis, however, Pico invokes others besides the Apostle Paul. "Pythagoras", he says, "wrote

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224. J. B. Lightfoot: Commentary on Colossians, p.169 (London, 1892).

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225. Ibid. p.172.

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nothing except a few brevities which, when dying, he committed to his daughter Damas. The carved sphinxes in the Egyptian temples used to admonish that the mystical doctrines should be guarded inviolate from the profane multitude by means of the intricacies of enigmas"

("Pythagoras nihil scripsit nisi paucula quaedam, quae Damae filiae moriens commendavit. Aegyptiorum templis insculptae Sphinges hoc admonebant ut mystics dogmata per aenigmatum nodos a profana multitudine inuiolata custodirentur").<sup>226</sup> Many deep mysteries are concealed

also in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. Of the Christian authors, Origen affirms "that Jesus Christ the Lord of life revealed many things to His disciples which

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226. Compare what Pico had written some years previously in the Commento (ad fin.), also with reference to the secret cabalistic tradition of the Jews: "Quanto fussi el medesimo stilo da' Pitagorici osservato se vede per la epistola di Liside ad Ipparcho, (sic - it should be Archippus, not Hipparchus), ne per altra ragione gli Egizii in tutti e' loro templi aveano sculpte le Sfinge, se non per dichiarare doversi le cose divine, quando pure si scrivano, sotto enigmatici velamenti e poetica dissimulazione coprire".

Opera Pici, p.758. Cf. Porphyry: Vita Pythag. LV, LVII. Pico speaks again to the same effect in the first Preface, addressed to Lorenzo de' Medici, of the Heptaplus (1489) - Opera Pici, p.1.

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they were unwilling to write down, lest they should become the common property of the masses";<sup>227</sup> and Dionysius the Areopagite speaks of esoteric mysteries having been transmitted by the authors of the Christian religion by a secret, unwritten, oral tradition. "In precisely this manner", continues Pico, "when the true interpretation of the law granted from above to Moses by a precept of God was revealed, it was called Cabala, which is the Jewish term corresponding to our word reception,<sup>228</sup> because one received from another that doctrine, not as a written institution, but by a regular succession of disclosures, as though by a law of heredity".

In this connection it is of interest to mention the account given by Moses Maimonides concerning the method by which the secret twelve-letter name of God used to be transmitted. "It is stated", he writes, "that at first the name of twelve letters was communicated to every man; but when the number of impious men increased it was only entrusted to the worthiest among the priests, whose voice, in pronouncing it, was drowned amid the singing of their

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227. Origen: Preface to the De Principiis.

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228. From the root קָבַץ , to receive.

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brother priests".<sup>229</sup> Thus it was secretly divulged under cover of the sound of the singing, so that from generation to generation none but the selected few might ever learn it.

In dedicating his Heptaplus (published in 1489) to Lorenzo de' Medici, Pico defends the apparent simplicity of the Mosaic writings as follows: "Both Luke<sup>230</sup> and Philo are very weighty authorities for the fact that he (Moses) was most learned in all the doctrine of the Egyptians. All the Greeks also who are held in most reverence - Pythagoras, Plato, Empedocles, and Democritus - made use of the Egyptian precepts. The saying of the philosopher Numenius is well known, that Plato was none other than an Attic Moses (non aliud esse Platonem quam Atticum Mosem);<sup>231</sup> and Hermippus the Pythagorean asserts that Pythagoras transferred many things from the Mosaic law into his own philosophy. If, then, Moses appears in his books to be rough and popular rather than a philosopher

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229. Moses Maimonides: Guide for the Perplexed (translated from the original Arabic by M. Friedländer), I, lxii, p.92 (London, 1942).

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230. Acts vii.22.

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231. Cf. Clement of Alexandria: Strom. I, 22.

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or a theologian of any great wisdom, let us recall to mind the frequent custom of the wise men of old either not to write divine things plainly or to write deceptively (dissimulanter). Hence they have been called mysteries - and things which are not hidden are not mysteries".

"If we consider that the reading of Moses is outworn", he says, "because on the surface he offers nothing which is not vulgar and rough, let us be consistent and condemn the roughness and ignorance of all the old philosophers whom we venerate as the masters of all wisdom". He reminds us that even our Lord spoke openly of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven to a few privileged disciples only, whereas to the multitude He veiled His message under the cover of parables; and even the inner circle of disciples could not receive all that their Master had to teach, for, until the Holy Spirit should come and teach them all truth, it was more than they could bear.<sup>232</sup> It must not be thought then (he tells us) that the whole mass of the Israelites - "poulterers, cooks, butchers, shepherds, servants, handmaids, to all of whom the law was handed down for them to read" - could have borne the burden of all the Mosaic, or rather the divine, wisdom. This had

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232. John xvi.12. Pico, however, overlooks the fact that these same disciples whom Christ had instructed in private were commissioned by Him after the resurrection to preach the gospel to every creature and to teach all nations -

to be veiled from their sight because of the dullness of their minds, just as the splendour of the divine glory which shone from Moses' face after he came down from the mount had to be veiled from their gaze.<sup>233</sup>

"We can believe that it was sufficient for his rude hearers if he covered over the light of knowledge, which wise men investigated, with somewhat crude words, as though it were surrounded by a horny shell, lest those of duller sight should be blinded. He therefore set the light so that it might be apparent to healthy eyes, but yet shut in and veiled lest it should be hurtful to those with weak sight".<sup>234</sup>

The question of the relationship between Moses and Plato, and indeed between the Old Testament prophets and the Greek philosophers in general, was one which had held a special fascination for some of the Church Fathers, particularly those of Alexandria where Platonism in its new garb found many admirers. It was felt that there was a certain measure of affinity between the Platonic and the Christian systems. Augustine was of the opinion

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233. Exodus xxxiv. 29-35.

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234. For the above v. Opera Pici, pp. 1 ff.

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that none come nearer to the Christians than the Platonists, and the chief grounds for this judgment were that the latter "have recognised the true God as the author of all things, the source of the light of truth, and the bountiful bestower of all blessedness".<sup>235</sup>

But while he acknowledged Plato to be the greatest of the Gentile philosophers, Augustine did not fall into the trap, as some of the Fathers before his time had tended to do, of regarding Plato as a prophet of Christian truth before Christ. "We for our part reckon Plato neither a god nor a demigod", he said; "we would not even compare him to any of God's holy angels, nor to the truth-speaking prophets, nor to any of the apostles or martyrs of Christ, nay, not to any faithful Christian man".<sup>236</sup>

During the first four centuries of the Christian era it was frequently urged by the opponents of Christianity that the noblest Christian sentiments had been more ably and clearly expressed by pagan philosophers at an earlier date, and especially by Plato. Thus the heathen scholar Celsus assailed Christianity in the second century with the charge that Christ and His apostles borrowed much of their teaching from Plato, whose writings they understood imperfectly and even perverted. To this calumny Origen

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235. Augustine: Civ. Dei VIII,5.

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236. Augustine: ibid. II, 14.

retorted that the alleged borrowings from Plato could without difficulty be matched with passages from the writings of the Old Testament, which are much older than those of Plato.<sup>237</sup> Even at the conclusion of the fourth century (396 A.D.) Augustine expressed a desire to see certain books composed by Ambrose "with much care and at great length against some most ignorant and pretentious men who affirm that our Lord was instructed by the writings of Plato".<sup>238</sup>

The contrary contention, that Plato had been enriched by an acquaintance with the Old Testament writings, is a theme which recurs not seldom in the works of the Christian Apologists and of the Alexandrian school from the second century onwards. Clement, to take an example, apostrophizes the Greek philosopher in the following terms: "Whence, O Plato, is that hint of the truth which you give? . . . You have learned geometry from the Egyptians, astronomy from the Babylonians; the charms of healing you have acquired from the Thracians; the Assyrians also have taught you many things; but for the laws which are consistent with truth and your sentiments

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237. Origen: Con. Cels. V, 65; VI, 12-19; VII, 27-35.

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238. Augustine: Letter XXXI, to Paulinus and Therasia.

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respecting God you are indebted to the Hebrews".<sup>239</sup>

Clement affirms, indeed, that Plato "fanned the spark of Hebrew philosophy", and "was not unacquainted with David", and quotes the saying of his contemporary, the philosopher Numenius: "What is Plato but Moses speaking in Attic Greek ( Μωυσῆς ἄττικίζων )?"<sup>240</sup> - a dictum to which, as we have seen, Pico alluded with approval. Clement cites the pre-Christian Hellenistic philosopher Aristobulus of Alexandria, who lived in the second century B.C., as saying that Plato had followed the Mosaic laws and had "manifestly studied all that is said in them";<sup>241</sup> and he declares also (later in the same work) that Aristobulus composed "abundant books to show that the Peripatetic philosophy was derived from the law of Moses and from the other prophets".<sup>242</sup> It would have been more accurate, as Schurer remarks,<sup>243</sup> had Clement said Greek philosophy in general rather than just the

239. Clement of Alexandria: Instruct. II, 1; cf. also II, 10 and Strom. I, 15, 19, 25, 29; V, 14.

240. Clement: Strom. I, 22.

241. Ibid.

242. Op. cit. V, 14.

243. E. Schürer: The Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ II, iii, p.240 (Edinburgh. 1886).

Peripatetic philosophy, since the available evidence indicates that Aristobulus maintained the indebtedness to Moses of Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and even the ancient poets Hesiod and Homer; indeed, he went so far as to affirm that the Pentateuch had been rendered into Greek, in its essentials at least, many years prior to the preparation of the Septuagint version, and had thus been available to the Greek sages from a very early date. This opinion is echoed by Clement, who asserts that a translation of the Exodus and of the whole code of laws of the Hebrews had been made prior to the time of Alexander and the Persians, "so that it is perfectly clear that Plato derived a great deal from this source, for he was very learned".<sup>244</sup> Clement, in fact, saw two streams meeting in

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<sup>244</sup>. Clement: Op. cit. I, 22. Cf. also Eusebius: Praep. Evang. IX, 6; XIII, 12. Eusebius, however, is in error when he speaks of Aristobulus as having been one of the Seventy who were responsible for the translation of the Old Testament into Greek under Ptolemy Philadelphus (Hist. Eccles. VII, 32) - a misconception which he shared with and perhaps took from Clement, who had said that Aristobulus lived in the time of Ptolemy Philadelphus (Strom. V, 14), instead of Ptolemy Philometor, confusing him, it seems, with the Aristobulus mentioned in 2 Maccabees 1.10.

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the advent of Christ, that of the Jewish law and that of Greek philosophy, though it was his belief that the truth of the latter was originally derived from the former, as from its source. "Before the advent of the Lord", he says, "philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness". God "is the cause of all good things, of some primarily, as the Old and the New Testaments, and of others secondarily, as of philosophy". As the law was a schoolmaster to bring the Hebrews to Christ, so also philosophy to bring the Hellenic mind. "Philosophy, therefore, was a preparation, paving the way for him who is perfected in Christ". Thus, in Clement's view, it could justly be held that "to the Jews belonged the law, and to the Greeks philosophy, until the Advent".<sup>245</sup>

This was an outlook which was entirely congenial to Pico with his ruling concept of a universal intellectual concord. To him, Hebrew was the original language, the Mosaic law the pristine science, and more particularly the unwritten esoteric interpretation of it, supposedly revealed at Sinai and handed down by a secret tradition, the foundation of all philosophical insights and mysteries. Pico, in fact, was very much in the Alexandrian succession

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<sup>245</sup>. Op. cit. I, 5; V, 14; VI, 17.

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and was thoroughly in sympathy with the Alexandrian fusion of philosophy and theology in its various forms, whether Jewish as propounded by Philo, or Christian as propounded by Clement and Origen, or pagan as propounded by Plotinus, Porphyry, and Jamblichus. It is apparent that Pico's diligent cabalistic studies coincided with his central intellectual interest and acted as a powerful stimulant to the learned curiosity of his mind.

In his Apologia we find Pico complaining that the members of the papal court which sat in judgment on his Nine Hundred Theses had entertained the most ludicrous misconceptions of the meaning of the term Cabala. They regarded the name, he says, as "something horrific, to be feared almost from its very sound, to such an extent that there are probably some among them who suspect that Cabalists are not men but rather mythical monsters (hircoceruos) or centaurs or creatures of a kind altogether fantastic". He recounts the amusing tale "that when one of them was once asked what the Cabala was he replied that it was a certain perfidious devil-man who was called Cabala, and that he had written many things against Christ, and consequently his followers were called Cabalists". And so the long-suffering Pico explains once more that, in accordance with the testimony of many sages both Hebrew and Christian, "apart from the law which God gave to Moses on the mount, and which he left written within the compass

of five books, there was also revealed to the same Moses by God Himself the true exposition of the law, together with the manifestation of all the mysteries and secrets which were contained beneath the shell and crude surface of the words of the law: in short, that on the mount Moses received a double law, the one literal and the other spiritual; that he wrote down the former and at God's Command communicated it to the people; but that as regards the latter he was enjoined by God not to write it down, but to communicate it only to the wise men, who were seventy in number and whom the same Moses had elected as custodians of the law in accordance with the precept of God;<sup>246</sup> and that to these likewise he gave the injunction that they were not to write it down, but were to reveal it to their successors viva voce, and the latter in turn to others, and thus onwards in a perpetual succession".

Later on (according to Pico) this secret tradition or Cabala was, despite the Mosaic injunction, committed to writing and is now contained in the cabalistic books, in which, we are told, "many, indeed almost all, things are found to be consonant with our faith - for they were handed down from the mouth of God, and were written by the Jews

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246. Pico evidently had Exodus xxiv. 1,9 f. and Numbers xi.16 f. in mind.

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before the manifestation of Christ in the flesh, at a time when they could not have been moved by any impulse to vitiate or corrupt that truth. From the books and authors of this science", he continues, "I have posited many conclusions with the intention of confirming our faith against the Jews; but, it may be through not having considered them carefully, the papal arbiters declared that they were suspect in the faith and savoured of Jewish perfidy. Afterwards, however, when they understood what the Cabala was, many of them were ashamed to have spoken in this way".

Pico's primary source for this story of the two-fold reception of the law by Moses was the 14th chapter of 2 Esdras (also commonly known as IV Ezra) - an apocryphal work purporting to come from the pen of Ezra, but in reality a spurious composition probably dating from the last decades of the first century A.D. In fairness to Pico it must be said that in the Middle Ages 2 Esdras was commonly viewed as a genuine work of Ezra, and had even been cited by some of the earlier Fathers of the Church.<sup>247</sup> Irenaeus,

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<sup>247</sup>. E.g. Epistle of Barnabas (ch.xii - cf 2 Esd. iv.33; v.5), Clement of Alexandria (Strom. III, 16 - cf. 2 Esd. v.35), and in the writings of Ambrose on a number of occasions.

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Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Chrysostom, and Basil are undoubtedly alluding to 2 Esdras xiv when they recount that the ancient scriptures, which were said to have perished when Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem, were miraculously restored by Ezra under divine inspiration.<sup>248</sup> Due consideration must also be given to the fact that the apocryphal books of Esdras were appended to the New Testament in the official Roman Vulgate.

In 2 Esdras the pseudo-Ezra tells how the voice of God came to him out of a bush and spoke as follows: "In the bush I did manifestly reveal myself unto Moses, and talked with him when my people served in Egypt; and I sent him and led my people out of Egypt, and brought him up to mount Sinai where I kept him with me for a long season, and told him many wondrous things, and I showed him the secrets of the times and of the end; and commanded him saying, These words shalt thou declare, and these shalt thou hide" (verses 1-6). Because the law has been destroyed and the people are in ignorance of the ways of God, Ezra is commanded to retire from society for a period of forty days, taking five

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248. Irenaeus: Adv. Haer. III, xxi, 2.

Tertullian: De Cult. Fem. I, 3.

Clement of Alexandria: Strom. I, 22.

Chrysostom: Homily VIII on Hebrews v.14.

Basil: Epistle to Chilo, XLII, 5.

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stenographers with him. "Come hither", says the voice of God, "and I will light a candle of understanding in thine heart which shall not be put out till the things be performed which thou shalt begin to write; and when thou hast done, some things shalt thou publish, and some things shalt thou show secretly to the wise" (verses 20-26).

Accordingly Ezra withdrew with the five stenographers and during the course of the next forty days was inspired to dictate no less than ninety-four<sup>249</sup> volumes to his scribes. Of these the first twenty-four were to be published openly so that all, both worthy and unworthy, should read them, and they correspond to the books of the Old Testament. The last seventy, however, were to be kept from the mass of the people and delivered only to those among them who were wise; for in them is "the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom, and the stream of knowledge". After completing this task Ezra is received up into heaven and is called "the Scribe of the Wisdom of the Most High" (verses 37-50).

Pico believes that he is able to adduce also the

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249. Some versions read "two hundred and four" and some "nine hundred and four", but these were alterations designed to enhance the thaumaturgical appeal of the story, and "ninety-four" is plainly the correct reading.

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support of the New Testament. He invokes the authority of Origen who, in commenting on Romans iii.1 f. - "What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly because that unto them were committed the oracles of God" - observes that it should be considered why the Apostle did not say that the writings, rather than the oracles, of God were entrusted to them;<sup>250</sup> from which it is apparent, Pico advises, that "besides the written law something else was handed down to the Jews, which Paul here calls the oracles of God, . . . in which they deservedly glory since these oracles are nothing other than what is called Cabala amongst the Hebrews, that is, the true sense of the law received from the mouth of God; and so it is sometimes called by the Hebrews תורה כעל פה, which means the law born from the mouth (lex de ore nata)".

Hilary is also cited, because in his exposition of the second Psalm he explains that Moses, apart from receiving the written law, committed its more secret and occult mysteries to the seventy elders of Israel, whence they were handed down orally from generation, until under Ezra they

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<sup>250</sup>. The simple answer to this is that St. Paul uses the expression eloquia Dei as a synonym for the Old Testament scriptures.

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were committed to writing in the manner already described. The seventy volumes which they filled corresponded in number to the seventy elders whom Moses had appointed and who had been succeeded in an unbroken line by the same number of initiates.

When referring to these seventy volumes in the De Hominis Dignitate, Pico makes the following interesting statement: "Sixtus the Fourth, the immediate predecessor as Supreme Pontiff of Innocent the Eighth under whom we now live so happily, preserved these books with the greatest care and zeal so that they might be rendered into the Latin language for the public benefit of our faith; and at the time of his death three of them had been translated. These books are regarded with such religious reverence by the Hebrews of this day that nobody is allowed access to them unless he has reached the age of forty years".<sup>251</sup>

Whether Sixtus IV had been the victim of an intentional imposture or not it is impossible now to say, nor do we know what were the precise contents of the volumes. As far as can be ascertained, the earliest cabalistic writings date back to the twelfth century A.D., though of course the various components - rabbinic, gnostic, theosophic, neoplatonic - which go to make up the cabalistic recipe have

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<sup>251</sup>. Opera Pici, p.330.

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their origins in much earlier times. The Zohar, which was the most influential of all cabalistic treatises, was composed only towards the end of the thirteenth century, a mere two hundred years before Pico's day.<sup>252</sup> Pico, however, believed in all sincerity that he had material to hand which originally had been written almost two thousand years previously! Hence the excitement and avidity with which he conned these tomes can readily be understood.

He tells his arbiters that he had acquired these cabalistic books at very great expense (summa impensa) - "for the Hebrews do not willingly communicate them to us Latins" - and, upon reading them through diligently, had found that almost all things in them were consonant with the Christian faith, so that it seemed to him that they provided Christians with the wherewithal "for transfixing the Jews with their own weapons, since the authority of the Cabalists, whom they hold in great honour and reverence, cannot be denied by them".<sup>253</sup> Earlier, in the De Hominis Dignitate, Pico had given the following account: "When, at no slight cost to myself (non mediocri impensa mihi), I had compared and studied these books with the greatest application and unremitting toil, I perceived in them - God is my witness -

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252. V. G. Scholem: Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, pp. 74 f., 156 ff. (New York, 1941).

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253. Opera Pici, p. 178.

a religion not so much Mosaic as Christian. There I discerned the mystery of the Trinity, the incarnation of the Word, the deity of the Messiah, the doctrines of original sin and its expiation by Christ, of the heavenly Jerusalem, of the fall of the demons, of the orders of angels, of purgatory, of the punishments of the infernal regions. There I read the same things as I read every day in Paul and Dionysius, in Jerome and Augustine. In these books, in fact, as respects philosophy, you may hear Pythagoras and Plato, whose systems have such an affinity to the Christian faith that our own Augustine renders boundless thanks to God that the books of the Platonists should have come into his hands. There is, in fine, practically no controversy between us and the Hebrews in which they cannot be refuted and overthrown from the writings of the Cabalists to such an extent that not even a corner is left in which they may hide themselves (In plenum nulla est ferme de re nobis cum Hebraeis controuersia, de qua ex libris Cabalistarum ita redargui conuincique non possint, ut ne angulus quidem reliquus sit in quem se condant). I have a most weighty witness to this fact", adds Pico, "in Antonio Cronico, a man of the greatest erudition, who when I was at a banquet in his house heard with his own ears Dattilo the Hebrew, an expert in this science, admit his complete acceptance of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity?<sup>254</sup>

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254. Ibid. p. 330.

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The Schoolmen had recognised four methods of biblical interpretation: literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical; and Pico points out that the cabalistic system corresponds to the anagogical method of exposition, "which is more sublime and divine than all others, conducting us upwards from earthly to heavenly things, from things sensible to things intelligible, from things temporal to things eternal, from the lowest to the highest things, from things human to things divine, from things corporeal to things spiritual; and it is from this source that the most valid arguments are furnished against the Jews, since the whole of the discord between them and us hangs principally on this fact that, as is most apparent in the epistles of Paul, they follow the letter which kills, but we the spirit which gives life".<sup>255</sup> As an illustration of this he instances the Jewish understanding of the prophecies concerning the setting up of the Messianic kingdom as being purely materialistic, whereas, if they would but apply the anagogical method of

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<sup>255</sup>. V. 2 Corinthians iii.6; but, as Plummer says in commenting on this verse (International Critical Commentary, Edinburgh, 1915), "we must not be misled by the common contrast between 'letter' and 'spirit', which means the contrast between the literal sense and the spiritual or inward sense of one and the same document or authority". This is just how Pico has been misled.

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interpretation, they would have to confess that Jesus of Nazareth who has liberated the world from the hand of the devil is the true Messiah, and that the prophets intended a heavenly Jerusalem, not an earthly city.

"Thus", continues Pico, "if the proofs of my cabalistic conclusions were seen it would be recognized that respecting all other matters there is scarcely any article in which the Jews are not compelled through the authority of the Cabalists to agree with us". The following may be given as examples of the conclusions which Pico had in mind: "Any Cabalist has to concede that the Messiah was to liberate them from diabolic and not temporal captivity"; "Any Cabalist has to concede from the sayings of the doctors of this science, who manifestly say this, that original sin will be expiated at the advent of the Messiah"; "In accordance with their own principles the Cabalists have necessarily to concede that the true Messiah will be such that it may be said of him that he is God and the Son of God".<sup>256</sup>

It is, no doubt, regrettable that Pico did not commit the proofs of his cabalistic theses to writing, because had

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256. Opera Pici, p. 110. These are numbers 25, 26, and 30 of the cabalistic theses.

25: "Quilibet Cabalista habet concedere, quod Messias

he done so we should have been in a far better position to form an estimate of the justness or otherwise of his claims. In this connection, however, two things must be taken into consideration: firstly, Pico's belief that it was quite wrong to publish such mysteries so that the common multitude would be able to read them; and, secondly, the inevitable fact that a bare proposition is something very different from an exposition, as he rightly pointed out in his Apologia: "There is a distinction", he wrote, "between those things which are proposed for disputation and those which are handed down in writing to be read as doctrine; for when something is proposed for disputation a brief,

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25: (cont'd) eos a captiuitate diabolica et non temporali erat liberaturus".

26: "Quilibet Cabalista habet concedere ex dictis doctorum huius scientiae hoc manifeste dicentium, quod peccatum originale in aduentu Messiae expiabitur".

30: "Necessario habent concedere Cabalistsae secundum sua principia, quod uerus Messias futurus est talis, ut de eo uere dicatur quod est Deus et Dei filius".

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concise and inexplicit proposition is proposed, involving in itself a multiplicity of difficulties of words and senses which must be resolved by those assembled for disputation; for if everything were explained in the proposition there would be no place left for disputation".<sup>257</sup>

In view of Pico's contention that the Cabala, when rightly understood, was thoroughly Christian in content, his arbiters posed the question "why all Jews do not become Christians, and why Augustine and Jerome and other doctors of the Church make no mention of this doctrine". In replying to this query Pico is unable to suppress the note of sarcasm: "I am amazed at the wisdom of those fathers", he says, "and I pray them to tell me whether the miracles of Christ were true or whether they have been falsely fabricated by the Christians. If they say that they were true, then let them tell me why all Jews did not become Christians". He adds that, "even if we should presuppose that the Cabalists wrote entirely the same things as Augustine wrote, yet it ought not to be doubted that the miracles of the living Christ, performed daily before their eyes, were of greater efficacy than the authority of any writer, however great his authenticity among them". He reminds them, too, that the Jews were forbidden to read

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257. Ibid. p.148.

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the cabalistic books before they had attained the age of forty years. As for their assertion that the doctors of the Church nowhere make mention of this doctrine, he believes that his references to the New Testament and to Hilary and Origen, as well as to Ezra, are sufficient to prove how mistaken they were in entertaining such a sentiment. It will probably be thought, however, that at this point his position is somewhat vulnerable.

Pico further explains that the schools of the Hebrews were divided into three sections: philosophers, Talmudists, and Cabalists. He maintains that when the doctors of the Christian Church alluded to the opinions and teachings of the Hebrews they must have intended the works of the Cabalists, since the Talmud was compiled more than a hundred and fifty years after the death of Christ and, besides, is antagonistic to the Christian faith, and the Jewish philosophers appeared on the scene centuries later even than the Talmud. "Therefore", he argues (though the validity of his premisses would now be questioned), "it remains that this doctrine of the Hebrews of which, according to the testimony of Jerome, the Catholic doctors spoke with deference, and which they so greatly approved, is that which our doctors themselves confess and believe to have been revealed by God to Moses, and from Moses in succession to the other sages, and which from this method of tradition is called Cabala.

. . . This is the original and true Cabala, of which I believe that I am the first to have made explicit mention; it is this which I use in my propositions, and since I expressly posit them against the Hebrews for the confirmation of our faith, I am at a loss to know how those arbiters can hold them suspect in the faith".<sup>258</sup>

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258. Opera Pici, pp. 179 f.

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CHAPTER XCHRISTIANIZING THE CABALA

It is not intended to attempt here any detailed exposition of the intricacies of Jewish cabalistic theory, but simply to investigate the use which Pico made of the cabalistic art in his earnest endeavour to demonstrate to Jew and Christian alike that the system of Cabala was thoroughly consonant with, and indeed a valuable proof of, the Christian faith. Convinced as he was of the sacred secrecy of these esoteric documents, Pico did not feel free to commit to paper the proofs of the cabalistic propositions which he had offered to defend as "entirely confirming the Christian religion from the very fundamentals of the Hebrew sages". In the section of his Apologia devoted to this subject he was chiefly concerned, as we have seen, with the vindication of these documents as conveying the authentic secret interpretation of the law which, ex hypothesi, had been divinely entrusted to Moses and subsequently written down at Ezra's dictation. Anyone, therefore, expecting these particular propositions to be enlightening will be disappointed, both because of Pico's unwillingness to publish abroad such inner mysteries, and also because he naturally kept his proofs up his sleeve in anticipation of the great debate which never

materialized. It is a further exasperation to find that in the propositions as printed various Hebrew terms from which he claims to derive particular Christian doctrines are omitted and replaced by the anonymity of an asterisk - no doubt as an extra safeguard against vulgar curiosity. It is not always impossible, however, to supply the missing terms from the context; but to deduce the process of proof is quite another matter.

If we are to arrive at any understanding of the cabalistic science, it is important that we should not fail to recognize the radical significance of the Hebrew language to its devotees. For them, Hebrew was in no sense a device or convention of man; it was nothing less than the very language of God, the tongue with which He had spoken even at the dawn of creation, and hence a language which, being antecedent to and independent of man, could by the way of its innermost secrets and significances conduct the contemplative person into the actual presence of God. This being so, it was divine not only in its sounds, but also in its letters and even in the component particles of those letters. Thus in the last of a group of eighty various philosophical conclusions we find Pico offering to defend the thesis that "if there is any original and underived language, it is clear from many inferences that it is the Hebrew

language".<sup>259</sup> Again, in the thirty-third of a group of forty-seven "cabalistic propositions following the secret doctrine of the wise Hebrew Cabalists, whose memory should ever be revered", he commits himself to the conclusion that "there are no letters in the entire law which do not manifest the secrets of the ten numerations in their forms, conjunctions, separations, curvature, straightness, deficiency, superfluity, smallness, greatness, coronation, closure, openness, and order".<sup>260</sup> In other words, every jot and tittle, every joint and aperture, and every conceivable relationship of the letters to each other, was of absolute significance, and that too quite apart from the meaning of any word or sentence of which the letters happened to be constituent elements.

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259. Opera Pici, p.89. "Si qua est lingua prima et non causalis, illam esse Hebraicam multis patet coniecturis".

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260. Ibid., p.82. "Nullae sunt literae in tota lege, quae in formis, coniunctionibus, separationibus, tortuositate, directione, defectu, superabundantia, minoritate, maioritate, coronatione, clausura, apertura, et ordine decem numerationum secreta non manifestent".

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In his notable book on Jewish mysticism Professor Gershom G. Scholem writes as follows respecting the cabalistic attitude to language: "Kabbalists who differ in almost everything else are at one in regarding language as something more precious than an inadequate instrument for contact between human beings. To them Hebrew, the holy tongue, is not simply a means of expressing certain thoughts, born out of a certain convention and having a purely conventional character, in accordance with the theory of language dominant in the Middle Ages. Language in its purest form, that is, Hebrew, according to the Kabbalists, reflects the fundamental spiritual nature of the world; in other words, it has a mystical value. Speech reaches God because it comes from God. Man's common language, whose prima facie function, indeed, is only of an intellectual nature, reflects the creative language of God".<sup>261</sup> This doctrine of the mystic significance of letters and words could even be extended to include languages other than Hebrew in so far as all language is viewed as being derivative from and therefore related to the pristine Hebrew tongue. As Scholem says in his chapter on the cabalism of the thirteenth century mystic Abulafia: "Every letter represents a whole world

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261. G. G. Scholem: Op. cit. p. 17.

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to the mystic who abandons himself to its contemplation. Every language, not only Hebrew, is transformed into a transcendental medium of the one and only language of God. And as every language issues from a corruption of the aboriginal language - Hebrew - they all remain related to it. In all his books Abulafia likes to play on Latin, Greek, or Italian words to support his ideas. For, in the last resort, every spoken word consists of sacred letters, and the combination, separation and reunion of letters reveal profound mysteries to the Kabbalist, and unravel to him the secret of the relation of all language to the holy tongue".<sup>262</sup>

There were in particular three methods or techniques whereby it was sought to penetrate to the hidden significances of words and letters, namely, gematria, notaricon, and temurah. Each letter of the alphabet was assigned <sup>a</sup> corresponding numerical value: by the technique of gematria words and phrases whose component letters totalled up to the same numerical value might be interchanged or regarded as mystically related to each other. By the technique of notaricon each letter of a word could be taken as the initial of a fresh word and thus, like an acrostic, the original word be developed

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262. Ibid. pp. 134 f.

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into a complete phrase or sentence. The initial or final letters of each word in a sentence might also be treated in the same way. By the technique of temurah letters might be anagrammatically interchanged and combined so as to form new words, the mystic issue of the original word. Pico refers to it as the "art of combination" (ars combinandi) and "alphabetical transposition" (alphabetaria reuolutio).<sup>263</sup>

Something must also be said here about the distinctive cabalistic doctrine of the sephiroth. This teaching was originally found in the Sepher Yetsirah or "Book of Creation", which was probably written some time between the third and sixth century A.D.<sup>264</sup> In this work the sephiroth or "numerations" were simply the ten elementary and primordial numbers which together with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet represented "the mysterious forces whose convergence has produced the various combinations observable throughout the whole of creation; they are the 'thirty-two secret paths of wisdom', through which God has created all that exists".<sup>265</sup> But as in

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<sup>263</sup>. Opera Pici, pp. 108, 180 f.

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<sup>264</sup>. V. Scholem: op. cit. pp. 75, 206.

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<sup>265</sup>. Ibid. p.76. Pico mentions the "thirty-two ways" in the 58th of his final group of cabalistic conclusions - Opera Pici, p.112.

course of time the cabalistic system developed in elaborateness, so the ten sephiroth came to be identified in significance with certain attributes or emanations of God. Here, indeed, was a system which, with its exhaustless treasure of mystic and wonderful virtues of numbers and letters and all things else, afforded unlimited scope for the curious and speculative energies of Pico's questing mind.

Yet God Himself, like the One of whom Pico speaks in the De Ente et Uno, surpasses all description and cannot be defined in terms of a number of attributes. This Deus absconditus the Cabalists called En-Soph, that is, the one without bounds or limits, and therefore beyond definition. But the existence of this hidden Being is as it were betrayed by the evidence of His activities in the realm of nature. This self-manifestation is at the same time a self-limitation voluntarily undergone by God, and the manifestation operates in ten regions or spheres.

It would not, however, be strictly accurate to explain these sephiroth merely in a Gnostic fashion as providing a means of ascent to the contemplation of God while simultaneously acting as a buffer between the divine Being and the created order. One cannot do better than quote again from Scholem here: "The difficulty lies precisely in the fact that the emanation of the Sefiroth is conceived as a process which takes place in God and

which at the same time enables man to perceive God. In their emanation something which belongs to the divine is quickened and breaks through the closed shell of His hidden Self. This something is God's creative power, which does not reside only in the finite universe of creation, although of course there, too, it is immanent and even perceptible. Rather do the Kabbalists conceive their creative power to be an independent theosophical world of its own, which antedates the natural world and represents a higher stage of reality. The hidden God, En-Sof, manifests Himself to the Kabbalist under ten different aspects, which in turn comprise an endless variety of shades and gradations. Every grade has its own symbolical name, in strict accordance with its peculiar manifestations. Their sum total constitutes a highly complex symbolical structure, in which almost every Biblical word corresponds to one of the Sefiroth. This correspondence, which in turn could be subjected to the most searching investigation regarding its motives, enables the Kabbalists to base their interpretation of Scripture on the assumption that every verse not only describes an event in nature or history but in addition is a symbol of a certain stage in the divine process, an impulse of the divine life".<sup>266</sup>

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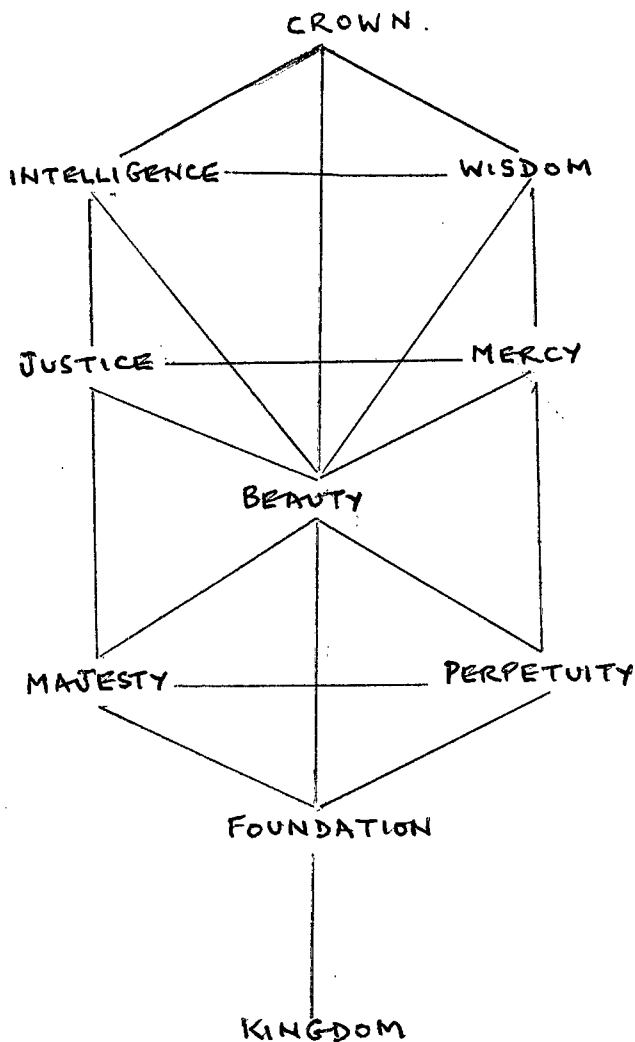
266. Scholem: op. cit. p. 209.

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The Gnostic-Neoplatonic embarrassment experienced in any suggestion of a direct association of God with the creation of the world resulted from the doctrine of the absolute transcendence of God and the evil nature of matter, contact with which inevitably meant defilement. Hence the essential dualism in the Platonic and Gnostic systems. With the theosophy of the Cabala, however, the difficulty of linking God to matter by an immediate creative act on His part lay in the conclusion that such a begetting would necessarily produce a creation which, like its Creator, would be absolutely perfect and infinite. Yet at heart the two problems were not different, for they both centred round the presumed incompatibility of the finite and the infinite, of the tangible and the intelligible, of the apparent and the real; and both sprang from a failure to understand the true nature of evil in its extent and in its effects. The Platonist therefore invented his archetypal "ideas" and the Cabalist his archetypal "man".

This archetypal or primordial man was known as Adam Cadmon ( אָדָם קַדְמוֹן ) and his representation was to be found in the ten sephiroth, themselves the image of God in which man was created. Of these ten sephiroth the highest is the "crown" ( כְּרוֹן ) of God, the second the "wisdom" ( חֵכֶם ) of God, the third the "intelligence" ( בִּינָה ) of God, the fourth the "mercy" ( רַחֲמִים ) of God,

the fifth the "justice" ( אֵינִי ) of God, the sixth the "beauty" ( תְּפִלָּה ) of God, the seventh the "perpetuity" ( נְצִיחַ ) of God, the eighth the "majesty" ( הוֹד ) of God, the ninth the "foundation" ( יְסוּד ) of God, and the tenth the "kingdom" ( מְלָכּוּת ) of God.



The accompanying diagram helps to show how the sephiroth were regarded as comprising three triads and three vertical pillars. In the middle pillar the three upper sephiroth indicate the three distinct triads in each of which they are the focus of unity. Thus the "crown" unites "wisdom" and "intelligence"

to form the topmost triad of the intellectual realm; "beauty" unites "mercy" and "justice" to form the triad of the moral realm; "foundation" unites "perpetuity" and "majesty" to form the triad of the material realm; and "kingdom", the tenth sephirah, unites all three triads, encompassing them as the divine halo of the shechinah glory.

The first triad constitutes the head of archetypal man, the second triad constitutes the chest and arms, and the third triad constitutes the generative faculty and the legs, all being encompassed by the tenth sephirah. The Christian interpreters of the Cabala viewed this trinity of trinities as of the highest significance, in particular associating the members of the topmost triad with the three persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and expounding the sixth sephirah, "beauty" or tiphereth, as representative of the incarnate Christ. Presumably it is this that is intended by Pico when he speaks in one of his theses of "great Adam, who is Tiphereth" (magnus Adam, qui est Tipheret).<sup>267</sup>

The ten sephiroth are not only interunited with

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267. Opera Pici, p.81 - in the 10th of the group of 47 cabalistic conclusions.

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each other, but they form a unity with the ineffable En-Soph.<sup>268</sup> They are like the branches of a divine cosmic tree whose ramifications form the substructure of the whole created universe, rooted in the life-sustaining En-Soph. Not only do they bespeak the ten intercommunicating chief attributes of God, but together they embrace His one supreme Name - the tetragrammaton

יהוה (JHVH). Even the letters which constitute the sacred four-letter name are in their very appearance symbolical in their shape of archetypal man. Thus the yod (י) represents the head, the first he (ה) the shoulders and arms, the vav (ו) the breast, and the second he (ה) the pelvis and legs.<sup>269</sup> This illustrates how, in the view of the Cabalist, each single letter of the Hebrew tongue, being heavenly in its origin, is divine not merely in its noetic significance but even in its visible shape.

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268. Cf. the 4th of Pico's final group of cabalistic conclusions: "Ensoph non est alii<sup>s</sup> numerationibus connumeranda, quia est illarum numerationum unitas abstracta et connumerata, non unitas coordinata" - Opera Pici, p.180 (numerationes = sephiroth).

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269. Zohar II, 72. The figure envisaged results from placing the letters in order one under the other:

יהוה

In accordance with the concept of the archetypal Adam Cadmon, the so-called anthropomorphisms of Scripture - as, for example, in Isaiah lix.4: "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save, either His ear heavy that it cannot hear", or in Psalm xcvi.1, where reference is made to God's "right hand and His holy arm" - should not in fact be regarded as such, but rather as theomorphisms; that is to say, God really has an arm, a hand, an ear, and so on, which are the archetypes - though not in any material mode - of the corresponding human members, and of which reality the human members are but a shadow or imperfect image. Thus the imago Dei in man is conceived as comprehensive, residing not simply in intellect or will, but in physique as well.

Pico has, as it happens, left us one example of his cabalistic treatment of Scripture in the concluding section of his Heptaplus or sevenfold exegesis of the six days of creation, where he develops an exposition of the opening phrase of Scripture, that is, "In the beginning", בְּרֵאשִׁית (expositio primae dictionis, id est, In principio). For centuries the first words of Genesis had provided a popular parade-ground for commentators, both Rabbinical and Christian, who desired to display their exegetical skill. Pico, with his newly won cabalistic wisdom, was not unwilling to exercise his talents in the

same arena so that at least a glimpse might be provided of the wonderful treasures which lie below the surface of the Mosaic writings.

"It is not rashly or without good reason", he writes, "that I wished to speak about this 'Beginning' in the concluding part of this work. I shall not here contend concerning the Son of God, that He is the Beginning through whom all things were made - for He is the Wisdom of the Father;<sup>270</sup> nor shall I prove that at this point the ancient Hebrews held views identical with those which we hold (for I intend to do this elsewhere). But I trust to give my readers a taste of the profundity of Moses by another method of interpretation". By this he means the method of Cabala; but before proceeding to the application of this method he explains that "it is the assured opinion of all the ancients, which they confirm with one voice as beyond doubt, that the entire knowledge of all the arts and of all wisdom, both divine and human, is contained within the five books of the Mosaic law, but disguised and veiled in the very letters

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270. Patristic writers had interpreted the word "beginning" in Genesis i.1 in a personal sense as referring to Christ (cf., e.g., Augustine: De Trin. I, xii, 24) and had also associated with it, as Pico does here, the concept of Christ as the "wisdom" of God.

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with which the words of the law are clothed." By taking these letters separately and reassembling them in a variety of combinations - that is by the technique of temurah - it is possible for those who have a capacity for occult wisdom, but for them only, we are told, to bring to light profound doctrines and secrets which are nowhere apparent on the surface; for the fact is, according to Pico, that the Mosaic order of letters provides "the outer shell of the internally hidden medulla of deep lying mysteries" ("corticem . . . medullae interius abditae latentium mysteriorum"). To discover the kernel, this outer shell must be broken up and its elements recombined in a succession of words full of new and luminous significance.

The treasures yielded by this method surpassed Pico's best expectations and filled him with enthusiasm, adept at the art though he did not claim to be. "Although not entering into the deeps", he tells us, "but simply scratching the shore of this ocean, I discovered a wealth of jewels which not even Hermus and Pactolus are said by the poets to afford; and so I thought it might not be unwelcome were I to make them known to our own people". In testing this technique out on the first word of Scripture, בְּרֵאשִׁית, he found to his amazement the full truth concerning the creation of the world laid bare and unfolded in that one word. "I tell of a thing

wonderful, unheard of, and incredible", he exclaims; "but if you pay attention you will soon believe, and the thing itself will prove me true" ("Rem dico mirabilem, inauditam, et incredibilem. Sed mox credetis, si attenderitis, et res ipsa uerum me demonstrabit").

From the letters of which the word is composed he improvizes the following sentence: אב בבר ראשית שבת - ab be<sup>bar</sup>reshith sabbath bara rosh esh seth rab ish berith tob; and he expounds it word by word: ab means "father"; bebar, "in the son and by the son" (pointing out that the preposition beth carries both meanings); reshith, "beginning"; sabbath, "rest" and "end"; bara, "created"; rosh, "head"; esh, "fire"; seth, "foundation"; rab, "great"; ish, "man"; berith, "covenant"; tob, "good". Thus he combined these words, all derived from the component letters of the term בראשית, to form the following statement: "In the Son and by the Son, who is the beginning and the end, or rest, the Father created the head, fire, and foundation of great man by a good covenant" ("Pater in filio et per filium principium et finem siue quietem creavit caput, ignem, et fundamentum magni hominis foedere bono").

The evidence afforded by this excursion of Pico's into the field of Hebraics shows that he was hardly what could be called a polished Hebrew scholar, even though the

Heptaplus was written in his twenty-eighth year, a relatively advanced stage in his brief career. It must be assumed, however, that he felt justified for the purposes of his exposition in setting down such infelicities as רַב אִישׁ (rab ish) as the equivalent of magnus homo, and בְּרִית תּוֹב (berith tob), without a preposition, as the equivalent of foedere bono; and it is quite possible that he was acquainted with texts in which תּוֹב was written instead of טוֹב. It should be remembered, too, that in his day Pico was a pioneer in the study not only of the cabalistic mysteries but also in large measure of the Hebrew language. The pioneer has to make his own path, whereas for those who follow after the way is already to some extent cleared. Therefore the honour due to a pioneer must not be withheld from him, particularly in view of the indebtedness to him of later generations for his enthusiastic reinstitution of Hebrew learning.

In expounding to his readers the purport of this sentence which his ingenuity has derived from the letters of the one original word, Pico points out that its significance, "lofty and full of doctrine though it is, cannot be apparent to everybody". Every Christian (he says) will readily understand what is meant by the statement

that "the Father created in the Son and by the Son",<sup>271</sup> and that "the Son is the beginning and the end", for He is so described, and also as "the alpha and the omega", in the New Testament.<sup>272</sup> He admits, however, that the remainder is "somewhat more obscure" - what, namely, is betokened by "the head, fire, and foundation of great man" and by the expression "good covenant".

Pico explains that the world is called great man (magnus homo) by Moses - as though Moses had wittingly concealed Pico's sentence within the first word of Scripture! - just as man is considered to be a small world (paruus mundus). Thus "by the three parts of man he symbolizes most aptly the three worlds, intellectual, heavenly, and corruptible, at the same time indicating by this figure not only that all the worlds are contained in man, but also briefly declaring what part of man corresponds to which world". Man's three parts are, firstly, the highest, which is the head, secondly, the central, which extends from the neck to the navel, and, thirdly, the lowest, which extends from the navel to the feet. "It

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271. Cf. John 1.3; Colossians 1.16.

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272. Revelation 1.8.

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is wonderful", he enthusiastically remarks, "with what beauty and precision of association they correspond in proportion to the three parts of the universe. In the head there is the brain, the fount of knowledge; in the breast there is the heart, the fount of motion, light, and heat; and in the lowest part are the reproductive organs, the source of generation. But likewise in the universe the highest part, which is the angelic or intellectual world, is the fount of knowledge, because it was made as to its nature for intellection; the middle part is the heaven, the source of life, motion, and heat, in which the sun like the heart in the breast, is dominant; and, as everyone knows, below the moon is the source of generation and corruption".

The reader's attention is called to the remarkable appropriateness with which these parts of the universe and of man mutually answer to each other. Moses (according to Pico) suitably designated the highest part by the appellation of "head"; the second he called "fire" for the reasons already indicated; and the lowest he described as "foundation" because "man's whole body is founded upon and upheld by it". And Moses (according to Pico) added that God created these things "by a good covenant" because "by the law of God's wisdom a covenant of peace and friendship resulting from the kinship and mutual harmony of their

natures<sup>273</sup> was decreed; and this covenant is good because it is so directed and ordered towards God, who is Good itself, that, just as the whole universe is one within itself, so also it is ultimately one with its Author".<sup>274</sup>

Pico's wonderment at the outcome of this cabalistic exercise is to be explained not just by the consideration that so much cosmological truth should have been concealed within the pregnant first word of Genesis, but by the additional discovery that the doctrine thus disclosed confirmed up to the hilt the correctness of the exegesis of the creation narrative which he had offered in the preceding chapters of the Heptaplus. In these chapters he had developed a characteristically Scholastic interpretation of the created order as consisting of three worlds: the elementary, sublunary, corruptible world; the intermediate heavenly world; and the supercelestial, angelic, intellectual world. To these he added a fourth, the world of man, compounded of a body formed from the dust of the earth, of a rational soul, and of an immortal spirit, and thus fitted to be a bond or link between the three spheres of creation. We have seen how in the concluding section he combines the Greek idea of man as

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273. I.e. of the universe as magnus homo and man as paruus mundus.

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274. The text of the Heptaplus is given in Opera Pici, pp.1 ff.

the microcosmos or paruus mundus with the Rabbinic idea of the universe as Adam Cadmon or magnus homo associated with the divine self-manifestation of the sephiroth. Unimpressed though we may be by this essay in the art of "alphabetical combination", the fact cannot be ignored that Pico, as the promoter of the Christian interpretation of the Cabala, had a considerable and by no means undistinguished following during the next couple of centuries both on the Continent and in England.

Amongst his English admirers was John Colet (1466-1519), junior to him by only three years, who speaks approvingly of the Heptaplus in his Letters to Radulphus on the Mosaic Account of the Creation and professes to follow Pico's division of the universe into four worlds. As a matter of fact, however, his divisions do not tally precisely with Pico's: Colet distinguishes the divine, the angelic, the celestial, and the sublunary worlds; whereas Pico distinguishes the angelic, the celestial, and the sublunary worlds, with the microcosmic world of man as the fourth. He would not have quarrelled with Colet's fourfold division, though it was not strictly accurate to include the divine among the distinctions of the created order; but it is rather surprising that Colet seems to have missed Pico's fourth distinction which is very clearly expounded in the Heptaplus. Colet, incidentally, refers to Pico as "the Platonist Mirandola"

(Platonicus Mirandula), which in general was not an inappropriate designation.<sup>275</sup>

Although Colet visited Italy, it was not until 1495, the year after Pico's death. But other English scholars had been there before him. William Tilly, for example, studied under Poliziano in Bologna in the 1480's; and about the same time Linacre and Grocyn had the benefit of the instruction of Poliziano and Chalcondyles in Florence. It was doubtless the accounts by men such as these of Ficino, Poliziano, Pico, and other Italian men of letters that determined Colet to make the journey to Italy.

Like Pico, Colet viewed the Mosaic account of the creation as accommodated to the inferior capacities of the people of Israel: a simple and mean mob required instruction which was suited to their stupidity and slowness ("crassiter et pingue docenda fuit stulta illa et macra multitudo"). Moses had to bear in mind the crudeness of these poor human specimens who but recently had been occupied with bricks and clay. The lofty wisdom of Moses concerning God and the creation of the world appears in an entirely homely and uncultivated guise, Colet says, when it is necessary for him to transmit it to the

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275. Colet: Letters to Radulphus on the Mosaic Account of the Creation, Letter II.

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popular understanding, with the result that his language is manifestly in keeping with the perception of the multitude rather than with his own genius. But while Colet followed Pico in this respect, he advanced beyond him in spiritual discernment along the road which was leading onwards to the great biblical awakening of the Reformation. By the end of his brief life Pico had arrived at a state of calm Christian confidence, and a disillusioned Ficino is reputed to have moved in the same direction. During his sojourn in Italy Colet no doubt heard and was deeply impressed, as Pico had been before him, by the impassioned prophetic utterances of Savonarola. Colet, indeed, moved on to a positive enunciation, in his lectures and writings on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans and in his treatise on Christ's Mystical Body, of the doctrine of the free grace of God in Christ Jesus as the sole ground of justification for sinners - a doctrine which was at the very heart of the Reformation of the sixteenth century in England and on the Continent.

CHAPTER XITHE SECRET NAMES OF GOD

In the cabalistic science no theme is more intimate than that of the knowledge of the names of God, and in particular of the tetragrammaton or ineffable four-letter name (JHVH); for in the tetragrammaton lie concealed all the secrets both of the being of God and of the universe which He has created. We have already seen that the very elements of the Hebrew language, the letters themselves, were regarded by the Cabalist as being full of mystical and ultimate significance, whether in separation or in combination. Indeed, there was absolutely no letter or word which was without the deepest esoteric symbolism, and as different minds gave themselves to the contemplation of the same letters and words, so an ever extending variety of meanings might be brought to the surface, to the awe and wonderment of the contemplator. In this chapter our chief aim will be to indicate how the Christian interpreters of the Cabala endeavoured, with Pico as their pioneer and stimulator, to substantiate their claim that distinctive Christian doctrines such as that of the trinitarian nature of the Godhead could be proved from the science of the Cabalists. And in doing this we shall at the same time be enabled to form some estimate of the mind of Pico

respecting these occult matters.

Pico, in his cabalistic propositions, had offered to demonstrate that the ineffable name  $\text{יהוה}$ , which the Cabalists said would be the name of the Messiah, afforded evidence that the Messiah "would be God and the Son of God, made man by the Holy Spirit, and that after Him the Paraclete would descend upon men for the perfection of the human race"; that no Cabalist could deny that the name Jesus, when interpreted in accordance with the method and principles of Cabala, signifies precisely that He is "God, the Son of God, and the wisdom of the Father, united to human nature in unity of substance by the third person of the Godhead who is the most ardent fire of love"; that it could therefore be understood why Paul had said that a name has been given to Jesus which is above every name, at which every knee should bow, of things in heaven and things on earth and things under the earth,<sup>276</sup> "because it is in the highest degree a cabalistic name", as would be understood by him who is profound in Cabala; that the word meaning "man", which is attributed to God when He is called a man of war,<sup>277</sup> provides perfect instruction by the method

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276. Philippians ii.9 f.

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277. Exodus xv.3.

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of Cabala concerning the mystery of the Trinity; and that by means of Cabala the mystery of the Trinity, together with the possibility of the incarnation, is declared to us by the name  $\aleph \iota \eta$ , that is, the pronoun "he", which is most properly attributed to God.<sup>278</sup>

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278. Opera Pici, pp. 108 ff. Numbers 15, 7, 8, 33, and 34 of the concluding set of cabalistic conclusions.

15: "Per nomen Iod, he, uau, he, quod est nomen ineffabile, quod dicunt Cabalistsae futurum esse nomen Messiae, euidenter cognoscitur futurum eum Deum, Dei Filium, per Spiritum sanctum hominem factum, et post eum ad perfectionem humani generis super homines paraclatum descensurum".

7: "Nullus Hebraeus Cabalista potest negare quod nomen Iesu, si eum secundum modum et principia Cabalae interpretemus, hoc totum praecise et nihil aliud significat, id est, Deum, Dei filium Patrisque sapientiam per tertiam diuinitatis personam, quae est ardentissimus amoris ignis, naturae humanae in unitate suppositi unitum".

8: "Ex praecedenti conclusione intelligi potest cur dixerit Paulus: Datum esse Iesu nomen, quod est super omne nomen, et cur in nomine Iesu dictum sit omne genu flecti, coelestium, terrestrium, et infernorum, quod etiam est maxime Cabalisticum, et potest ex se intelligere qui est profundus in Cabala".

As they stand, of course, propositions such as these are cryptic in the extreme; but an examination of the writings of Pico's followers in the study of cabalistic lore may help to indicate the line of their elaboration. The most notable of these followers was the German Hebraist Johann Reuchlin. It was not until 1492, when he was thirty-seven years of age, that Reuchlin found a man to teach him the Hebrew language. The occasion was at Linz while he was attending the court of the Emperor Frederick III, and his instructor was the Emperor's physician Jacob Loans, a scholarly Jew. This was but a couple of years after his meeting with Pico in Italy had fired him with an enthusiastic ambition to learn Hebrew and master the teachings of the Cabala.<sup>279</sup>

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278. (cont'd) 33: "Per hanc dictionem, quae scribitur per aleph, iod, et schin (et significat uirum) quae Deo attribuitur cum dicitur uir belli, de trinitatis mysterio per uiam Cabalae perfectissime admonemur".

34: "Per nomen quod tribus literis scribitur, he, uau, et aleph, quod nomen Deo propriissime attribuitur et maxime conuenienter, non solum ad Cabalistas, qui hoc expresse saepius dicunt, sed etiam ad theologiam Dionysii Areopagitae, per uiam Cabalae Trinitatis mysterium cum possibilitate incarnationis nobis declaratur".

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279. Cf. C. D. Ginsburg: The Kabbalah, pp.206 ff. (London, 1865); Graetz: op. cit. IV, pp.462 f.

A mere two years later, in 1494 (the year of Pico's death), his first cabalistic work, The Wonder-Working Word (De Verbo Mirifico), was published. As might have been expected, it bore unmistakeable evidences of being the production of a man who was as yet far from expert in either Hebrew or Cabala. The treatise is, in fact, a somewhat ill-digested mixture of Pythagorean and cabalistic notions. In it, Hebrew is lauded as the original and divine language, traces of which may be discovered in the sacred writings of every people; and, as had been maintained many times previously, such truth as is to be found in the ancient philosophers, both Greek and Oriental, is explained as a derivation from the primeval source of all truth, the divinely revealed theology of the Hebrews.<sup>280</sup>

It is pointed out that of the divine names, which are diverse and numerous, there are four in particular which have been appropriated from the Hebrews by the Greek philosophers, namely, אהיה אשר אהיה - ego sum qui sum, "I am that I am" - which God disclosed to Moses,<sup>281</sup> thus revealing Himself as the source of all existence, and which

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280. Reuchlin: De Verbo Mirifico II, ix.

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281. Exodus iii. 14.

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corresponds to Plato's τὸ ὄντως ὄν ;  $\aleph\aleph$  - idem, "He" - signifying the One who alone remains eternally the same, which was adopted by the Greek philosophers as  $\tau\alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{o}\nu$ ;  $\psi\eta$  - ignis, "fire" - the mode of God's appearance to Moses in the burning bush,<sup>282</sup> a name reminding us thus that it is God who enlightens and enlivens all things. But though these names are three in number, they are really one, and together represent the sacred Trinity. Inferior to these three names are the ten sephiroth which are expressive of the divine attributes.<sup>283</sup> There is, however, a fourth name which is far above all those names which are descriptive of the nature of the Deity, a name which in an incommunicable manner bespeaks the very essence of God. This is the name of four letters, the thrice holy tetragrammaton  $\aleph\aleph\aleph$ , which Pythagoras sought to copy when he spoke of the tetrad or tetractys (τετρακτύς), as also the Pythagorean decade may be recognized as an imitation of the ten sephiroth.

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282. Exodus iii.2 ff.

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283. Reuchlin's classification of the sephiroth in the De Verbo Mirifico is muddled and inaccurate.

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Reuchlin's further disclosures concerning the divine names as set forth in the De Verbo Mirifico need not detain us here, apart from mentioning that in the third book the work reaches its climax when "the wonder-working word" is at last revealed by the author. This is none other than the name "Jesus" written in Hebrew characters, יהשוה (JHSVH), and thus constituting a sacred pentagrammaton or name of five letters. But this pentagrammaton is compounded of the four letters of the tetragrammaton, plus ו, the latter being symbolical of fire (וה) and the letter which Jerome assigned to the Logos in his mystical exposition of the alphabet. Thus Reuchlin believes that he has demonstrated beyond cavil that the name alone of Jesus affords conclusive proof of the truth that its bearer is not only the Logos and Light of the world, but also very God of very God.

By 1517, when his second cabalistic book, the De Arte Cabalistica, appeared, Reuchlin's knowledge of Hebrew and Cabala had made considerable advances and he was held in universal veneration for his learning. This second cabalistic work was, in fact, a product of the fierce and prolonged Pfefferkorn controversy (to which specific reference is made at the beginning of book III). By writing it Reuchlin hoped to demonstrate that the cabalistic doctrines of the Jews provided incontestable corroboration of the truth

of the Christian faith, and thus to save the Hebrew books from the bonfire which had been planned for them by the enemies of the Jewish people. Fresh ammunition for Reuchlin's cabalistic armoury had been afforded by a Latin translation, made about 1510 by Paul Ricci, a converted Jew, of the Gates of Light, a work of the thirteenth century Jewish mystic Joseph Gikatila. It is of interest to know that a manuscript translation of another of Gikatila's cabalistic books, the Gates of Justice, had been possessed and studied by Pico.<sup>284</sup> In writing the De Arte Cabalistica Reuchlin was strongly influenced by Gikatila's Gates of Light.

Reuchlin explains that after Adam had fallen into sin God mercifully sent the angel Raziel to assure His fallen creature that the restoration to be provided would more than counteract the great ruin occasioned by his sin. At God's command Raziel also "showed him the way of expiation and expounded the divine language allegorically in the cabalistic fashion, of which not only not a single word, but not even any letter, however minute or slight, nor even any ornament is placed to no purpose".<sup>285</sup> Adam was further informed

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284. V. Blau: op. cit., p.19.

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285. Blau (op. cit., p.52) wrongly takes the subject of this sentence, hic, to refer to the Cabala, whereas Raziel is the clear antecedent; and in any case the feminine haec would be the appropriate pronoun, as elsewhere in this version, were the Cabala intended as the subject here.

that original sin would be expiated by a righteous and pacific man sprung from himself, whose name would contain the four letters J, H, V, H (that is, the letters of the tetragrammaton), and that by an upright faith and an unresisting offering this man would put forth his hand and take fruit from the tree of life, which would be the salvation of all who hope in him. "This was the first Cabala of all, the tidings of primordial salvation. . . . This is that supreme and most sacred revelation, to which all the divine revelations are traced back. This is the choicest tradition, the most healthful communication, in which all cabalistic communications are recapitulated, and all traditions of divine things, all instructions in celestial things and visions of the prophets and meditations of the saints are united and conferred".<sup>286</sup>

The ineffable name of four letters represents, indeed, the concentration of all the divine names, which are seventy-two in number. This is demonstrated by Reuchlin, employing the technique of gematria, in the following manner: the gematria of yod is 10, of he 5, of vav 6, and of he again 5; by progressive combination it is seen that yod = 10, yod + he = 15, yod + he + vav = 21, yod + he + vav + he = 26; and the sum of 10, 15, 21, and 26 is 72. Thus the number seventy-two is implicit in the tetragrammaton.

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<sup>286</sup>. Reuchlin: De Arte Cabalistica, pp. 3017 ff.

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But more significant than any such considerations for the Christian investigator of the Cabala are the divine names of twelve and forty-two letters. The former derives from the tetragrammaton and comprises four words, namely, אב בן ורוח הקדש - Pater, Filius, et Spiritus sanctus, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit". From this name the forty-two letter name is derived and comprises eleven words, namely, אב מלכים בן מלכים רוח הקדש מלכים שלושה ב' אחד אחד בשלשה - Pater Deus, Filius Deus, Spiritus sanctus Deus, tres in uno, et unus in tribus, "The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God, Three in One, and One in Three". Well may this revelation cause Reuchlin to exclaim, "O how great is this height, how great this profundity, which is apprehended by faith alone!"<sup>287</sup> He gives as his source for these trinitarian names of twelve and forty-two letters a book entitled the "Letter of Secrets" (הסודות הסודות אגרת, Iggereth Hassodoth) in which a certain "Rab Hakados" replies to the question of a Roman called Antoninus concerning the sacrosanct names.

As to the identity of this "Rab Hakados", Pietro Galatino, in his book De Arcanis Catholicae Veritatis which was published soon after Reuchlin's De Arte Cabalistica and

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287. Op. cit., p.3152.

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in the same year (1517), explains that there was a certain Judas, son of Simeon and grandson of Gamaliel, St. Paul's rabbinical instructor, who was called "Rabbenu Haccados" (magister noster sanctus) by the Jews because of the excellence of his doctrine and integrity; but that there had also been another "Rabbenu Haccados" who during the period of the Roman consulate (that is, before Christ) foretold and committed to writing many remarkable things concerning the Messiah. In modern times, says Galatino, the Jews have confused these two men because of the similarity of their names and as a result have ventured to deny that the writings of "Rabbenu Haccados" were predictions of events yet future. In other words, the Jews contended that this was a case of vaticinium post eventum.<sup>288</sup>

According to Galatino, "Rabbenu Haccados" wrote down these prophetic mysteries in a book called the "Revealer of Secrets" ( נחזק נבג, Gale Razia), and his words were copied by Rabbi Nehumia, son of Haccana, and sent in the above-mentioned "letter of secrets" to his own son Haccana. Antoninus, a consul of Rome, had asked "Rabbenu Haccados" to divulge to him the names of four, twelve, and forty-two letters,

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<sup>288</sup>. Pietro Galatino: De Arcanis Catholicae Veritatis I, ii, 6 B-C, in the edition of 1603, published together with Reuchlin's De Arte Cabalistica in the same volume.

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and their significance. To this the Rabbi replied that these were divine secrets (arcana diuina) which men ought not to disclose, but that such things ought not to remain hidden from men of learning and reason, of whom Antoninus was one. He explained that God has no name of which we can have knowledge, since His substance is His name and vice versa, and it is impossible for us to have knowledge of God's substance. The names, however, by which He is called are attributes. The four-letter name is called His "proper name", not because it is His substantial name, but because it defines the limit of our capacity for understanding God, beyond which we are unable to ascend. From this name all the other names proceed. It should be noted, moreover, that the names of twelve and forty-two letters are not single words, but each is composed of a number of words which together display one truth. After discoursing on the mysteries of the tetragrammaton, the Rabbi disclosed the other two secret names.<sup>289</sup> These names as given by Galatino are identical with those cited by Reuchlin from the same source.

Galatino also gives another rendering of the name of forty-two letters which, he says, was current among the most ancient Jews:

אב אב בן אב ורוח הקדש  
 - אב אב ל א שלשה אלהים כי אב אלוה אחד

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<sup>289</sup>. Ibid. II, x, 74 G - 81 D.

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Pater Deus, Filius Deus, et Spiritus sanctus Deus;  
uerumtamen non tres Dii, sed unus Deus, "The Father is God,  
the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God: yet not three  
Gods, but one God". It will be observed that there are in  
fact forty-three Hebrew letters in this compound name as  
transcribed by Galatino; but the inconsistency, whatever  
its cause, may easily be rectified by omitting the vav  
before  $\aleph$  . Galatino does not tell us his source of  
information for this version of the forty-two letter name,  
but that there should be two different versions he regards  
as unimportant, since both are identical in significance,  
that is to say, both propound the trinity of the divine  
persons and the unity of the divine essence. "This", he  
affirms, "was the true and perfect exposition of the divine  
name of four letters which the ancient Jews expressed by  
means of the name of forty-two letters". He complains,  
however, that it was an exposition of which the more modern  
Jews were ignorant.<sup>290</sup>

Later in the same century we find the French scholar  
Philippe de Mornay (1549-1623) making use of the same source  
in his book on The Truth of the Christian Religion, which  
was published in 1581. While pointing out that the Jews  
had expounded certain Old Testament passages in a trinitarian  
sense, as do the Christians, he also remarks on the trouble

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290. Ibid. II, xii, 88 E - 89 F.

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taken by the Talmudists since the advent of Jesus Christ to twist these passages to another meaning. The name of forty-two letters as given by de Mornay actually contains forty-four letters owing to the fact that  $\text{וּטָר}$  is written with a vav ( $\text{וּיְטָר}$ ) and a further vav has been prefixed to the second  $\text{טַר}$  ( $\text{טַרְוַר}$ ). Whether or not these are errors of transcription is immaterial, for with the omission of these two vavs the name is identical with that taken by Galatino from the Gale Razia.<sup>291</sup>

After the publication of the De Arcanis Galatino was accused of having forged the Gale Razia, or if not he, some other Christian. He defended his good faith in a letter to Pope Paul III, in which he remarks that the Iggereth Hassodoth, extracted from the Gale Razia, was included by Bishop Justinian of Nebia in his gloss on Psalm sixty-seven.<sup>292</sup> Galatino affirms that this was first turned into Latin by Paul of Heredia "after he had been converted from Jewish

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291. Philippe de Mornay: De la Vérité de la Religion Chrestienne contre les Athées, Epicuriens, Payens, Juifs, Mahumedistes, et autres Infidèles, VI, pp.109 ff. (Original edition of 1581).

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292. This was in Justinian's polyglot edition of the Psalms published in 1516 at Genoa, which became celebrated because it included an account of the discoveries of Columbus. The Iggereth Hassodoth is given by Justinian in both Hebrew and Latin.

blindness to the light of Christian faith", and that subsequently he (Galatino) had prepared another Latin translation in order that this little book might be known to all.<sup>293</sup> He adds that Paul of Heredia, "a man highly skilled in Hebrew learning", was Pico's instructor (Ioannis Pici Comitiss Mirandulani praeceptor), a statement which, though unconfirmed from elsewhere, may be accepted as coming from one who was a contemporary and fellow-countryman of Pico.

It has, in fact, been categorically asserted that Paul of Heredia was the author of the Gale Razia and that he impostrously attributed it to Rabbi Nehumia; but no evidence has been offered in support of this affirmation,<sup>294</sup> made hundreds of years after the alleged imposture is supposed to have taken place. The presentation of a conjecture as though it were an undoubted fact is a procedure which has nothing to commend it.

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293. V. A. Kleinhaus: De Vita et Operibus Petri Galatini, O.F.M., scientiarum biblicarum cultoris (c.1460-1540), in Antonianum (Periodicum Philosophico-Theologicum Trimestre., Rome), Vol.I, No.2 (April, 1926), pp.145-179, and Vol.I, No.3 (July, 1926), pp.327-356.

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294. A. Freimann: Paulus de Heredia als Verfasser der kabbalistischen Schriften Igeret ha-Sodot und Galie Raze, pp. 206-209 in Festschrift zum siebzigsten Geburtstage Jakob Guttmanns (Leipzig, 1915).

What is even less convincing, however, is to find the Gale Razia explained away on grounds which are hopelessly anachronistic. This is done in the Jewish Encyclopedia, where it is asserted that this work was composed by Julius Conrad Otto (otherwise known as Naphtali Margolioth or Margaritha), a Jewish convert to Christianity, and the work is described as "full of false Talmudic citations and of misinterpretations of Talmudic sayings regarding the Messianic idea of the doctrine of the Trinity."<sup>295</sup> This assertion is repeated by Kleinhans in his essay on Galatino, who, while saying that the Gale Razia was published in Nuremberg in 1605 (that is, sixty-five years after the death of Galatino), attempts to dodge the anachronism by suggesting that the book might have been based on material from Galatino's pen.<sup>296</sup> Blau follows suit when he refers,

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295. Jewish Encyclopedia, Vol. VIII, pp.329 f.

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296. Kleinhans: Op. cit., pp.170 f. "Opus vero נ"ץ נ"ץ non ab eo (sc. Rabbenu Haccados) scriptum est: nam traditio Iudaeorum nihil de hac re dicit, sed iuxta Iul. Fürst a Naphtali Margalit, qui christianus factus Iulius Conradus Otto vocabatur. Libellus vero eius editus est a. 1605 Norimbergae, 1613 Stetinae estque 'Demonstratio dogmatum, quae omnes rabbini recte sententias ante et post Chr.n. de unitate essentiae divinae, trinitate personarum, etc.' Huius libelli manuscripti exemplar Galatinus forsan adhibuit".

somewhat contemptuously, to Galatino's citations from "the palpably fraudulent Gale Razia, a hodge-podge of bad cabalism and worse Christianity, later established as the work of Julius Conrad Otto, a convert to Christianity".<sup>297</sup> The main obstacle in the way of accepting this explanation - and it is an insurmountable one - is the consideration that Julius Conrad Otto had the misfortune not to be born until 1562, a score or so years after Galatino's death, and his conversion to Christianity took place in 1603. It is true that in 1605 he published a book with the title Gale Razia, but it was quite other than the Gale Razia known to Galatino, both in point of time and in content. The true identity of the author of the earlier work has not been established and remains a matter for conjecture.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>297</sup>. Blau: Op.cit., p.62.

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<sup>298</sup>. I am indebted to Professor Gershom G. Scholem for kindly entering into a sympathetic correspondence on this subject. In a letter from Jerusalem dated May 12th, 1952, he writes: "Blau, of course, blundered badly when he confounded the G(ale) R(azia) quoted by all the Christian Kabbalists of the early 16th century with Otto's much later G.R. (which I possess and which does not contain any kabbalistical stuff, the bombastic title notwithstanding)". Professor Scholem concurs with the view that Paul of Heredia fabricated the

There is, however, a Jewish author whom Galatino quotes on several occasions, namely, Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), and there is no question about the authenticity of these quotations. This is a consideration which at least argues in favour of Galatino's good faith when quoting from the Gale Razia, even though his faith may have been misplaced in this instance. It is to chapters LXI and LXII in particular of Part One of Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed that Galatino turns for support in this matter of the four, twelve, and forty-two letter names of God. Speaking of the four letter name, Maimonides writes: "Every other name of God is a derivative, only the Tetragrammaton is a real nomen proprium, and must not be considered from any other point of view. . . . No other name is called shem ha-meforash except this Tetragrammaton, which is written, but is not pronounced according to its letters". It was only in the sanctuary that the priests pronounced this name as it was spelt when giving the sacerdotal blessing; it was also on the lips of the high priest on the Day of Atonement. We are to understand, therefore, that "the shem he-meforash (the proper

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 298 (cont'd) passages which are attributed to Rabbenu Haccados, though posing merely as the one who had translated them into Latin. Paul's Epistola de Secretis (Iggereth Hassodoth) was first published at Naples in 1482, i.e. when Pico was nineteen.  
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name of God) is the Tetragrammaton, and that this is the only name which indicates nothing but His essence".<sup>299</sup>

The secret of the pronunciation of the tetragrammaton was so jealously guarded that only once in seven years was it communicated to a distinguished disciple, and included in the transmission of the pronunciation was the transmission of its meaning, which involves, according to Maimonides, "certain metaphysical principles". Maimonides points out that the twelve letter name, consisting of a number of words, had been known to the Jewish sages and used by them as a substitute for the tetragrammaton. Unlike the tetragrammaton, however, this twelve letter name was at first not withheld from their disciples; but when "unprincipled men" became acquainted with it "the sages concealed also that name, and only communicated it to the worthiest among the priests, that they should pronounce it when they blessed the people in the Temple; for the Tetragrammaton was then no longer uttered in the sanctuary on account of the corruption of the people". Maimonides describes how the voice of the priest pronouncing the twelve letter name used to be drowned by the singing of his brother priests, so that the name could not be distinguished by the rest of the people present.

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<sup>299</sup>. Maimonides: Guide for the Perplexed, p.91.

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Regarding the name of forty-two letters, Maimonides says: "Every intelligent person knows that one word of forty-two letters is impossible. But it was a phrase of several words which had forty-two letters. There is no doubt that the words had such a meaning as to convey a correct notion of the essence of God". By using many words instead of one, a particular idea could be conveyed more adequately to the understanding; but while he asserts that the names of twelve and forty-two letters "must have included some metaphysical ideas", Maimonides does not attempt to indicate the words of which they were compounded or the nature of the ideas which they communicated.<sup>300</sup>

Both Galatino<sup>301</sup> and de Mornay<sup>302</sup> affirm that the "Shema" of Deuteronomy vi.4 - שמע ישראל יהוה אחד - "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord" - was interpreted in the Zohar in a trinitarian sense. "That great man Moses", says Galatino, "placed the name of God three times in this verse with the express purpose of indicating distinctly the trinity of the divine persons; and by immediately adding the word 'one' he shows that,

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300. Op.cit., pp.90 f.

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301. Galatino: De Arte Cabalistica II, i, pp.39 ff.

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302. De Mornay: op.cit., p.106.

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though there are three divine persons, there are not three Gods, but that God is one. . . Thus the trinity of persons in no sense detracts from the unity of the divine nature. Moreover, the Jews are quite unable to deny that this triple name of God designates the three divine persons, namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, since Rabbi Simeon ben Jochai makes the following comment in the Zohar on this text: 'Hear, O Israel, that is, Israel of old, as Rabbi Ibba says; יהוה (Jehovah), that is, God, who is the beginning of all things, the ancient of ancients, the garden of roots, and the perfection of all things, and is called the Father; מלכינו (our Elohim), that is, our God, the profundity of rivers and the fount of knowledge which proceeds from the Father, and He is called the Son;

יהוה (Jehovah), that is, God: this is the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the two, and is called the measure of speech; He is one, and encloses and binds the one with the other; nor can the one be divided from the other'".

The same authority is quoted by Galatino as giving a trinitarian interpretation to the tersanctus of Isaiah vi.3 - קדש קדש קדש יהוה צבאות, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts" - by teaching that the first "holy" refers to the Father, the second to the Son, and the third to the Holy Spirit.<sup>303</sup> But this passage, as

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303. Galatino: op.cit. p.42.

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Ginsburg points out, is omitted from present recensions of the Zohar. Ginsburg quotes other passages of a trinitarian import from the Zohar,<sup>304</sup> and remarks that "some Jewish writers have felt these passages to be so favourable to the doctrine of the Trinity, that they insist upon their being interpolations into the Zohar, whilst others have tried to explain them as referring to the Sephiroth". By way of further comment on the text of Isaiah vi.3, Galatino observes that the threefold "holy" is followed by the single tetragrammaton, thus clearly indicating that the three persons are not three Gods, but one God.<sup>305</sup>

Even the tetragrammaton, though compounded of four letters, as the term itself indicates, is trinitarian in structure, for there are but three different letters in its composition. Galatino expounds its significance as follows: "Although the letters of this name are four in number, whence it has not inaptly been called in Greek the tetragrammaton, yet in reality there are only three, namely, yod, he, and vav. The fact that the second of these occurs twice, that is, in the second and fourth

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304. Ginsburg: op.cit., pp.138 ff.

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305. Similarly also de Mornay: op.cit., pp.106 ff.

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positions, has caused it to be thought that there are four. Thus the three letters of the name designate the three divine hypostases; for the first, namely, yod, which is interpreted as the beginning, because it is the beginning of all other letters and is the fontal source of all writing, while being itself derived from no letter,<sup>306</sup> most correctly indicates the Father among the divine persons, who, since He derives from no other, but the other persons emanate from Him, is called the beginning without a beginning. The second letter, namely, he, which signifies being or life, most aptly indicates the Son among the divine persons, through whom all things which have been made came into being, and whatever has been made is life in Him. The third letter, namely, vav, which stands for the copulative term 'and', best expresses the Holy Spirit who, since He is the love of the Father and of the Son by whom they love each other, is rightly called the copula or bond of them both".

In answer to the query why it is only the second of these letters that occurs twice, Galatino replies: "It is for the purpose of indicating that the Son alone, who

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306. Of all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet yod was the smallest in size and the simplest in form, and hence was regarded as the primary and elemental letter in writing.

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is the second person of the Trinity, has a twofold relationship; for since the Father, who is the first person, produces only and is not produced, He has but one relationship in this sense; and since the Holy Spirit, who is the third person, does not produce but is produced only, He also has but one relationship; whereas the Son, who is the second person, has two relationships, since He both produces and is produced: for He is produced by the Father, and together with the Father He produces the Holy Spirit".<sup>307</sup> Galatino also draws attention to the teaching, which was propounded by the Cabalists, that the three syllables of the tetragrammaton signify the three persons of the Godhead, while each separate syllable at the same time signifies the whole name, since each person is full and perfect God. Just as the three syllables together form one name, so the three divine persons are one God.<sup>308</sup>

In these and many other ways the cabalistic art

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307. Galatino is, of course, propounding the doctrine of the procession of the Son from the Father, and of the Holy Spirit from both Father and Son, involving the early concept of the Father as the fons deitatis. This doctrine of the double procession of the Holy Spirit, contained in the "Filioque" clause of the creed, was rejected by the Eastern Church.

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308. Galatino: *op.cit.* pp 81 ff

was impressed for the purpose of corroborating the deepest metaphysical mysteries of the Christian faith. The whole procedure was, however, far from satisfactory; it was a mirage that dazzled, only, in the end, to disappoint, and has now no place except in the catalogue of intellectual curiosities. For one thing, its sources, so far from being, as the devotees firmly believed, pristine and original, were late and spurious. For another, the Christian revelation stands in no need of such gratuitous support, for its appeal is not to the intellect merely, but also, and indeed primarily, to the heart. Its deepest reality, which is centred in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is open for all to experience; its secrets are available not just to an élite few who have a capacity for intellectual initiation, but ~~for~~<sup>to</sup> the poor, the humble, the sinful. Mystical fancies, however great the virtuosity with which they are presented, may fascinate the mind, but can hardly touch the soul - not that Pico was unaware or unconvinced of this, but he seems not to have realized that his esotericism carried within itself the seeds of a new gnosticism.

And yet it is not sufficient for Jewish scholars of the present day to dismiss these cabalistic expositions as the fictions of unscrupulous Christian authors or renegade Jews. There are still certain facts which call for an explanation on their part. Firstly, there is the

fact that over the years the Christian faith was embraced by such large numbers of Cabalists:<sup>309</sup> this would seem to support the belief that some of the distinctive Christian doctrines had become entangled in the theosophical net of the Cabala. Secondly, there is the fact that there was a secret tradition of the twelve and forty-two letter names of God amongst the Jews: the onus rests on contemporary Jewish scholars to make a frank disclosure, supported by clear and adequate evidence, of what these secret names actually were or are. And thirdly and especially, there is the fact that the Jewish scriptures of the Old Testament provide a comprehensive praeparatio for the great Christian doctrines of the incarnation, the vicarious atonement of the Messiah, and even of the trinity.

This chapter will not, we hope, be viewed as a digression from the main matter of our book. The themes which Reuchlin, Galatino, and others developed and propounded were the very themes that Pico himself had enunciated as the instigator of this art. It is no unwarranted assumption to conclude that Pico's exposition

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309. Cf. Ginsburg: op.cit., p.143.

Blau: op.cit., p.65.

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of them, had he committed it to writing, would have coincided with theirs. It should be remembered, too, that the Christian Cabalists of the sixteenth century were indebted not only to Pico, but also, perhaps through him, to the Gale Razia which had been made public by Paul of Heredia, one of Pico's instructors in these mysteries, according to the testimony of Galatino. We may take it, therefore, that their Christian interpretation of the Cabala affords us a trustworthy reflection of the mind of Pico on these things.

CHAPTER XIITHE PRIZE OF ETERNAL HAPPINESS

As the years of his brief earthly course slipped by Pico devoted his attention more and more earnestly to the study of Holy Scripture and the practice of the Christian life. The seventh exposition of the Heptaplus had been entitled "The Happiness which is Life Eternal" (De Felicitate quae est Vita Aeterna), but at the time of writing this Pico was still very much the Neoplatonist and Schoolman. His thinking was philosophical rather than biblical, even though this particular work was intended to be an exegesis of the opening chapter of the Bible. "Happiness I define as follows", he then wrote: "the return of each single thing to its source; for happiness is the summum bonum, and the summum bonum is that which all things seek; but that which all things seek is none other than the source of all things". It is the authority of the Aristotelian philosophy upon which Pico confessedly leans for this definition. He goes on to explain that the end of all things is the same as the source of all things, and in doing so invokes the authority of the Pythagorean philosophy with its two well-known appellations of "the One" and "the Good". The One is so called

because it is the source of all things, just as unity is the source of all number; and the Good is so called because it is the end of all things, the rest, in other words, and absolute happiness of all things.<sup>310</sup>

The Heptaplus was published in 1489, and in the few remaining years of his life the beginnings of a marked change in Pico's approach to Scripture can be distinguished. We find him seeking less and less for the allegorical and esoteric significance which was supposed to lie concealed beneath the crude cortex of the words and adopting a method of exposition which endeavours to set forth the plain, straightforward sense of the biblical text. A portion of each day was now devoted to the study and exposition of the Scriptures, and we are informed by his nephew that he came to set little store by all books other than the Bible, to the constant meditation of which he had determined to give the rest of his life.<sup>311</sup> It was his hope that he would be able to produce commentaries covering the whole range

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310. Opera Pici, p.45

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311. Vita: " . . . minimumque aliis amplius affici libris praeterquam Veteri Nouoque Testamento, aetatisque residuum in eis semper uoluendis consumere statuisse".

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of Scripture and founded upon a studious collation of such early manuscripts and versions as were available. But death intervened and left his task scarcely begun. All that we have today are a few opuscles - expositions of the Lord's Prayer and of four or five Psalms<sup>312</sup> and some brief rules for the Christian warfare.<sup>313</sup> We also possess his work "Against Astrology" (In Astrologiam), a magnum opus of twelve volumes in which he exposes those superstitions that he had once entertained. This was intended, however, to be but one section of a truly monumental work directed against all the enemies of the Church, whether godless philosophers, idolators, Jews, Mohammedans, heretics, or unworthy Christians.<sup>314</sup>

There was besides a mass of manuscript documents which Pico left, but which, to the distress of his nephew, proved to be practically if not quite indecipherable. In his early years his handwriting had been particularly regular and beautiful, but this deteriorated later as his hand vainly endeavoured to keep pace with his thought, and

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312. V. Garin: op.cit., p.30.

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313. Opera Pici, pp.332 ff: Regulae XII partim excitantes, partim dirigentes hominem in pugna spirituali.

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314. Vita.

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legibility was further impaired by numerous corrections, erasures, interlineations, and abbreviations, so that his nephew was left with a daunting task as editor of his literary remains.<sup>315</sup>

It is apparent, then, that in his last years the authority of Holy Scripture had become a governing factor in his living and thinking, and had he lived longer he might naturally have moved on to that position which the Continental Reformers were shortly to reach. In the Apologia, which was after all written as a retort to the papal commission before which he had been arraigned, there are already signs of a commendable independence of outlook and of a respect for Scripture rather than for ecclesiastical tradition as the norm of Christian faith. Thus he did not hesitate to write: "Although the writings of the holy doctors, placed outside the biblical canon, should be handed down and read and received with due reverence, yet their sayings are not of such firm authority and unassailability that it is now<sup>t</sup> lawful to contradict them or to have doubts concerning them, unless they are evidently and expressly proved by Holy Scripture, or by the authority and decree of the Church they are to

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315. Ibid.

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be held as fixed and indubitable truth. Therefore by the extra-canonical sayings of the saints an opinion cannot be precisely demonstrated as manifestly heretical, for certain and indubitable faith does not exist where infallible truth is not found".<sup>316</sup> He appropriately quotes Augustine to the effect that Scripture is the supreme authority for faith, which, if suspect in one part, is suspect in all.<sup>317</sup>

Pico proceeds to offer three proofs that infallible

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316. "Quamuis enim sanctorum doctorum scriptura, extra canonem Bibliae posita, sit tradenda et legenda, et cum debita reuerentia suscipienda, non tamen sunt eorum dicta ita firmae autoritatis et immobilitatis, ut eis contradicere non liceat, et circa ea dubitare: nisi uel per scripturam sacram aliter probentur euiden<sup>e</sup>ter et expresse, uel firmiter per Ecclesiam ipsa authorisantem determinatum fuerit, illa firmam ueritatem et indubiam continere. Ideo per dicta sanctorum, extra canonem Bibliae, praecise non potest conuinci opinio haeretica manifeste: nam ubi non est infallibilis ueritas, ibi nec fides certa et indubia".

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317. V. Augustine: Contra Faustum XI, 5; Letter XXVIII to Jerome.

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truth must not be sought in the extra-canonical sayings of the saints. The first of these was that the Church doctors themselves were in doubt as to whether their own statements were erroneous or not. Once again Augustine is cited, in this instance as having explicitly requested that his writings should be corrected wherever they might be found to be erroneous, and as having in fact retracted many things which he had formerly written in his works.<sup>318</sup> Pico points out that just as the writings of Augustine could not be regarded as a source of indubitable truth, so also the writings of the other doctors of the Church were marked with fallibility.

The second proof adduced is that of the discord which exists amongst the ecclesiastical authors. "Nobody", says Pico, "except those who have not read their books, is ignorant of the great discord that exists in the sayings of the saints outside the canonical Scriptures";<sup>319</sup> and he sets down an ample number of examples of such contradictions. The third proof is closely bound up with

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318. V. Augustine: De Trinitate I, i, ii; Retractationes.

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319. "Quanta enim sit discordia in dictis sanctorum extra canonicas scripturas, nemo non nouit, nisi qui illorum libros non legit".

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the first two and emphasizes "the special prerogative of Holy Scripture and of the ordinances of the universal Church, to which alone we concede the excellence of infallible truth".

It will be observed that Pico continues to pay lip service to the notion of a double authority of both Scripture and Church; but it is significant that the proofs and examples he offers leave no room for an infallible authority of the Church when there is any conflict with Scripture. Here again Augustine is quoted with considerable effect: "The reasonings of any men whatsoever, even though they be catholics and of high reputation, are not to be treated by us in the same way as the canonical Scriptures are treated. We are at liberty, without doing any violence to the respect which these men deserve, to condemn and reject anything in their writings".<sup>320</sup> It was thus that Pico sought to defend himself against the strictures of those who had condemned the proposition in which he had presumed to dissent from Thomas Aquinas and "the common way"

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320. Augustine: Letter CXLVIII, to Fortunatianus.

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concerning the method of Christ's descent into hell.<sup>321</sup>

This spirit of independence is apparent throughout the Apologia. In writing of the sacrament of the eucharist he quite frankly faces the fact that after the words of consecration the host on the altar still retains its qualities and accidents of "breadness" (paneitas), as is evident to the senses. "We see", he says, "that a person is nourished by the host, just as by real bread, and that the host suffers putrefaction, and in due course all those accidents happen to it which happen to the substance of bread".<sup>322</sup> He maintains that the doctrine of the conversion <sup>or</sup> of transubstantiation of the bread into the body of Christ involves an unreasonable and unwarranted multiplication of miracles, and draws attention to the significant words of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians x.16: "The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" Pico suggests that, just as Christ

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321. Opera Pici, pp. 143 ff. This particular proposition was number 8 of "conclusiones in theologia numero XXIX secundum opinionem propriam a communi modo dicendi satis diuersam". The conclusion read as follows: "Christus non ueraciter et quantum ad realem praesentiam descendit ad inferos, ut ponit Thomas et communis uia, sed solum quoad effectum"; ibid. p.94.

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322. "Videmus enim aliquem nutririx hostiis, sicut ex uero pane, et putrefieri hostias, et eis denique omnia accidere, quae accidunt substantiae panis"

assumed humanity in the incarnation - not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by the assumption of the manhood into God, as the Athanasian creed declares - so also it is possible that Christ assumes "breadness" in the sacrament, without there being any conversion or transubstantiation of the elements. At one point, indeed, Pico approaches close to the receptionist view of the presence of Christ in the sacrament, which was to be expounded by the Reformers in the next century, when he proposes that by the apostolic statement ("The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?") we are not meant to understand "that the substance of the bread or the species of the bread is truly and really Christ or the body of Christ, nor that the body of Christ is correctly predicated of the substance of the bread or of the species of the bread; but the sense is, the bread which we break in the sacrament, that is, the participation of the bread broken on the altar is the participation of the divine body, that is, it makes us to be one with Christ".<sup>323</sup>

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323. Opera Pici, pp.181 ff. <sup>(PICO)</sup> The proposition in question was the second of the 29 theological conclusions. It read as follows: "Si teneatur communis uia de possibilitate suppositionis, in respectu ad quamcunque creaturam, dico quod sine conuersione panis in corpus Christi uel paneitatis annihilatione potest fieri, ut in altari sit corpus Christi secundum ueritatem sacramenti Eucharistiae, quod sit dictum loquendo de possibili, non de sic esse"; ibid. p.93.

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It is certainly not without significance that Pico shows himself to have been acquainted with the opinions of Berengarius who, in the eleventh century, opposed the crudities of the doctrine of transubstantiation and declared that the words of institution were to be understood in a symbolical sense. While the elements of bread and wine visibly remained such, yet at the same time and invisibly they became Christ's body: the sacrament received into the mouth was the sign and pledge to the believer of the whole heavenly Christ received into the heart. Berengarius had propounded this view in a positive manner (de sic esse), but Pico was more cautious and suggested it merely as a possibility (de possibili). Once again, it is permissible to wonder whether, had he lived some thirty or forty years longer than he did, Pico would not have made common cause with the Reformers of the sixteenth century in their doctrine of the sacraments as well as in other important matters.

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~~144~~ (cont'd from overleaf): "Per illam locutionem non datur intelligi, quod substantia panis aut species panis sit uere et realiter Christus aut corpus Christi, nec quod corpus Christi praedicetur in recto de substantia panis aut de specie panis; sed est sensus, panis quem frangimus in sacramento, id est, participatio panis fracti in altari, participatio corporis diuini est, id est, facit nos unum esse cum Christo".

Another proscribed proposition which Pico defended at length and with much intellectual vigour was the one which affirmed that "it is more reasonable to believe that Origen is saved than to believe that he is damned".<sup>324</sup> In the course of his argument he observes that the Church had "canonized many who none the less persisted right up to death in opinions which were erroneous respecting the faith and which were subsequently condemned as heretical by the Church, opinions, moreover, which we nowhere read were retracted by them". Amongst such saints who had erred in the faith he mentions Papias, Victorinus, Irenaeus, and Cyprian. But a distinction must be made, he says, between error in the intellect and error in the will: if there is no blemish in the will or intention, then no error of the intellect, however great, can prejudice a person's salvation. Thus even if for the sake of argument it were granted that Origen erred in important matters of the faith, it would not be sufficient for those who wish to prove his damnation to point to this: it is incumbent upon them to demonstrate obstinacy or

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324. Opera Pici, p.95. "Rationabilius est credere Originem est saluum quam credere ipsum esse damnatum" - the last of the group of 29 conclusions in theology.

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negligence or some other malice of the will. Otherwise the error of rebaptizing heretics must have debarred Cyprian, and the error of chiliasm Papias, from salvation.

Again, even if it were established that Origen had sinned mortally during his lifetime, no matter how gravely, "unless his final impenitence is established, it is rash to assert as true that he is damned".<sup>325</sup> It is only <sup>by</sup> a special divine revelation that it is possible to be certain that anyone has been damned to hell. There is no evidence that the Church ever enjoyed such a special revelation, and thus the Church is in no position to make a definite pronouncement respecting Origen's eternal damnation. It is true that the Church may condemn particular opinions and doctrines as heretical and denounce a man for propounding them, but it may not dogmatize concerning the state of a man's soul; "for it does not pertain to the Church to damn or to save men's souls, since this belongs to Him alone who is the Judge of the living and the dead".<sup>326</sup> And so, although the Church should

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325. " . . . nisi constet de eius finale impenitentia, temerarium est uere asserere ipsum esse damnatum".

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326. " . . . ad Ecclesiam non pertinet damnare animas hominum aut saluare, quia ad illum attinet solummodo, qui iudex est uiuorum et mortuorum".

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determine and decree that Origen or anyone else is condemned to hell, there is no necessity of the catholic faith which binds us to assent to this judgment, says Pico. Neither the papal commission which had condemned his thesis nor the Church as a whole has any right to go beyond its proper province, which is that of the revealed faith. Pico concludes his defence by offering a reminder of the divine warning of Deuteronomy iv.2: "Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you".<sup>327</sup> This was an audacious snub to the Church's vaunted infallibility and authoritarianism and affords further clear evidence of Pico's sturdy independence and unwillingness to be bound by pronouncements of the Church which were contrary to the revealed truth of Scripture and to reason. ~~327~~

The last illness and death, at the age of forty-four, of his intimate friend and patron Lorenzo de' Medici affected Pico deeply. This was in April, 1492, and Pico

~~327. ". . . meis libris meo oculis contentus a pueris usque intra fortunam uiuere didici, et (quantum possum) apud me habitans, nihil extra meipsum suspiro uel ambio".~~

327. Opera Pici, pp.199 ff.

could scarcely have had any premonition that his own death would take place within the next three years. But the loss of the illustrious Lorenzo confirmed to his mind the uncertain and transitory nature of this life and of such glories as may attend it. On the 15th of May that year, only a few weeks after this unhappy event, Pico wrote a revealing letter to his nephew in which he earnestly exhorted him to abjure earthly delights and to set his heart on the things of God and the joys of heaven. He reminds him of St. Paul's admonition that the flesh lusts against the Spirit,<sup>328</sup> so that to indulge the flesh degrades a man to the level of a beast. St. James had advised Christians to rejoice when they fell into a variety of temptations,<sup>329</sup> and not without reason, comments Pico, "for what hope is there of glory if there be no hope of victory; or what opportunity is there for victory where there is no battle?" The rewards of victory will far surpass the Christian's every desire and expectation.

To court the favour of princes, to seek ambitiously after worldly honours and position, is to involve oneself

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328. Galatians v.17.

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329. James i.2.

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in a weight of cares, frustrations, and disillusionments. "From my boyhood onwards", says Pico, "I have learnt to be content with my books and my leisure and to live within my means, and, keeping my own company as far as possible, I have no desires or aspirations outside of myself".<sup>330</sup> The peace and happiness of mind which attend a clear conscience excel by far all the pleasures which this life has to offer. "What, indeed, is there to be desired among worldly pleasures, which in the seeking weary us, in the having delude us, and in the losing torment us? Do you fancy, my son, that the minds of wicked men are not distressed with constant cares? It is the Word of God which can neither deceive nor be deceived. But the heart of the wicked man is like the troubled sea which cannot rest;<sup>331</sup> for to him nothing is secure, nothing tranquil, but all things lead on to fear and anxiety and death. Shall we, then, envy such people? shall we emulate them? and, forgetful of our own privilege, forgetful of our true

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330. " . . . meis libris meo ociolo contentus a pueris usque intra fortunam uiuere didici, et (quantum possum) apud me habitans, nihil extra meipsum suspiro uel ambio".

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331. Cf. Isaiah lvii.20: "But the wicked are like the troubled sea; for it cannot rest", which Pico is echoing here.

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homeland and heavenly Father, shall we who have become freeborn return to their slavery, miserably to live, more miserably to die, and most miserably of all to suffer the punishment of eternal fire with them?"

Pico exhorts his nephew to exclaim with the prophet: "Let us break their bands asunder and cast away their yoke from us".<sup>332</sup> These are the men, he explains, quoting from St. Paul, whom God has given ~~us~~<sup>us</sup> to shameful passions and a reprobate mind, "to do those things which are not fitting, full of all unrighteousness, envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malignity, backbiters, hateful to God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil things, without understanding, disorderly, without natural affection, covenant breakers, unmerciful; who, though they daily witness the justice of God, yet do not understand that those who practise such things are worthy of death; for they not only do the same, but also consent with those that do them".<sup>333</sup> He advises his nephew that he should never wish to please those to whom virtue is displeasing, but that he should rather keep in mind the

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332. Psalm ii.3 (Vg).

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333. Romans i.26, 28 ff. Pico's rendering of this passage shows a number of verbal differences from the Vulgate.

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words of the Apostle: "We ought to please God rather than men"; and: "If I please men, I am not the servant of Christ".<sup>334</sup>

"What great madness it is not to believe the Gospel", says Pico, "whose truth the blood of martyrs proclaims, apostolic voices announce, miracles prove, reason confirms, the world attests, the elements utter, and the demons confess. But it is far greater madness if, while not doubting the truth of the Gospel, one should live as though not doubting its falsity. If it is true that it is very hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven,<sup>335</sup> why do we daily gape after the heaping up of riches? and if it is true that that glory should be sought which comes from God and not from men,<sup>336</sup> why do we always hang upon the pronouncements of men? Nobody is concerned about pleasing God. If we firmly believe that the time is coming when the Lord will say: Depart, ye cursed, into eternal fire, and again: Come, ye blessed, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world,<sup>337</sup> why is it that

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334. Acts v.28 - Pico has "placere" instead of "oboedire" (Vg.); Galatians i.10.

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335. Mark x.23 ff.

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336. John v.44; xii.43.

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337. Matthew xxv.41.34.

there is nothing we fear less than hell and nothing we hope for less than the kingdom of God? What can we say other than that there are many who are Christians in name, but very few in reality?"

Almsgiving and prayer are two valuable remedies against the world and the devil. In connection with the former, Pico recalls the sayings of Christ: "With what measure ye mete it shall be measured to you again", and "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy".<sup>338</sup> As for the latter, "I care not", he says, "how long your prayer may be, but how effectual it is and how fervent".<sup>339</sup> What we ought to pray for will be suggested by the Holy Spirit, who intercedes for us,<sup>340</sup> by our immediate necessities, and by our study of Holy Scripture. "I entreat you", writes Pico, "to set aside the fables and triflings of poets and ever to have Holy Scripture in your hands. There is nothing that you can do more pleasing to God and more profitable to yourself than to

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338. Matthew vii.2; v.7.

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339. Cf. James v.16.

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340. Romans viii.26 f.

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study the sacred text day and night without ceasing".<sup>341</sup>

Pico concludes the letter with this admonition:

"Finally, I wish to advise you - as I did frequently when you were here with me - that there are two things which you should never forget: firstly, that the Son of God died for you,<sup>342</sup> and secondly, that you too, however long you live, shall shortly die. With these, as with two spurs, the one of fear and the other of love, urge forward your horse through the brief course of this fleeting life to the prize of eternal happiness".<sup>343</sup>

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 341. " . . . sacra lectio, quam ut omissis iam fabulis  
 nugisque poetarum semper habes in manibus etiam atque  
 etiam rogo. Nihil Deo gratius, nihil tibi utilius facere  
 potes, quam si non cessaueris literas sacras nocturna  
 uersare manu, uersare diurna".

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 342. Cf. Romans v.6,8.

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 343. Opera Pici, pp.340 ff. "Illud postremo te  
 admonitum uelim (de quo hic etiam cum mecum eras tecum saepe  
 locutus sum) ut duo haec nunquam obliuiscaris, et Filium Dei  
 pro te esse mortuum, et te quoque etiamsi diu uixeris breui  
 esse moriturum. His quasi geminis stimulis, altero quidem  
 timoris, amoris altero, urge equum tuum per breue stadium  
 momentanae uitae ad praemia felicitatis aeternae".

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It will have been observed from the extracts given above that Pico had now, in his thirtieth year, become very largely a man of one book, the Bible. The "fables and triflings of poets" and most of his other intellectual fantasies and fascinations were being left behind. Indeed, a new purpose was beginning to take shape within his heart. His grief at the death of Lorenzo was added to by the deaths of two more of his dearest friends: Ermolao Barbaro in July, 1493, at the age of thirty-nine, and Angelo Poliziano in September, 1494, at the age of forty. Pico himself breathed his last only a few weeks after Poliziano, on the 17th of November, 1494. He was thirty-one years old, a youth in days, but an elder in erudition. His nephew describes how one day not long before this, when they were walking in an orchard at Ferrara and conversing of the love of Christ, Pico revealed to him that he had formed a secret purpose that, after he had dispensed his remaining wealth to the poor and completed certain books on which he was working, he should wander barefoot through the world preaching Christ. Subsequently, it seems, Pico modified this intention and determined to join the Dominican order of Preachers. With this in view he was hurrying to complete the writing which he had in hand. But these hopes were not to be realized, for he was struck down by a malignant fever which resisted all medicines, and thirteen days later he was dead.

The funeral sermon was preached by Pico's spiritual mentor, Girolamo Savonarola. His words were addressed to the people of Florence, the city which had meant most to Pico in his lifetime and where also he had died. "I suppose", said Savonarola, "that there is not one of you who did not know Giovanni Pico of Mirandola. He was a man lavishly endowed by God with great gifts and great graces and possessed of far-ranging learning. It has, perhaps, been the lot of no other mortal to enjoy so splendid a genius. By his death the Church has suffered a great loss; for it is my opinion that, had he been granted a longer span of life, the monument of his writings would have caused him to excel all who have preceded him in the last eight hundred years". The preacher went on to tell his hearers of Pico's secret intention to devote his life to the cause of the Gospel, and declared his belief that his early death was an unexpectedly severe punishment from God because he had delayed to put this intention into effect. Savonarola had at least the somewhat belated satisfaction of himself investing Pico's body with the habit of the Preaching Friars before it was interred in the church of S. Marco.

Thus ended Pico's short but remarkable career. His unusual natural gifts and attractiveness of personality had been enhanced by his humility and honesty of outlook

and unremitting intellectual industry. His passionate quest for truth, which had led him across the troubled ocean of human speculation, brought him at last to the haven of the Christian Gospel. The desire for the praise of men had been entirely supplanted in his heart by the desire for the glory of God. The scholarly recluse was consciously preparing for the day when he would be transformed into the itinerant preacher; but the consummating joy of this service was denied him. Yet it was peculiarly fitting that the last words to have been uttered over him should have come from the lips of Savonarola, the great preacher of his day, for Pico's pilgrimage had led him from the infertile fields of human philosophy to the threshold of the prophetic ministry.

The astonishing achievements of his brief life are assigned by his nephew to five causes: his incredible genius, a most tenacious memory, copious ability, constant and indefatigable study, and, finally, his contempt for earthly things. We may fittingly conclude by recounting, from the same source, the story of one who sought Pico out because of the fame of his learning, and who went away enriched in his heart as well as in his mind. They fell to conversing on morality, and the visitor was so moved by one admonition of Pico's in particular that from then on his vicious ways were entirely reformed. Pico's

words were these: "If we kept before us Christ's death suffered for love of us, and at the same time thought upon our own death, we should be on our guard against sin".<sup>344</sup> It was with this clear evangelical ring that his own earthly pilgrimage reached its close.

F I N I S

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344. "Si Christi mortem, nostri amore perpessam, prae oculis haberemus, propriam quoque identidem cogitando, caueremus a uitiiis".

PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA

By

Philip Edgcumbe Hughes

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